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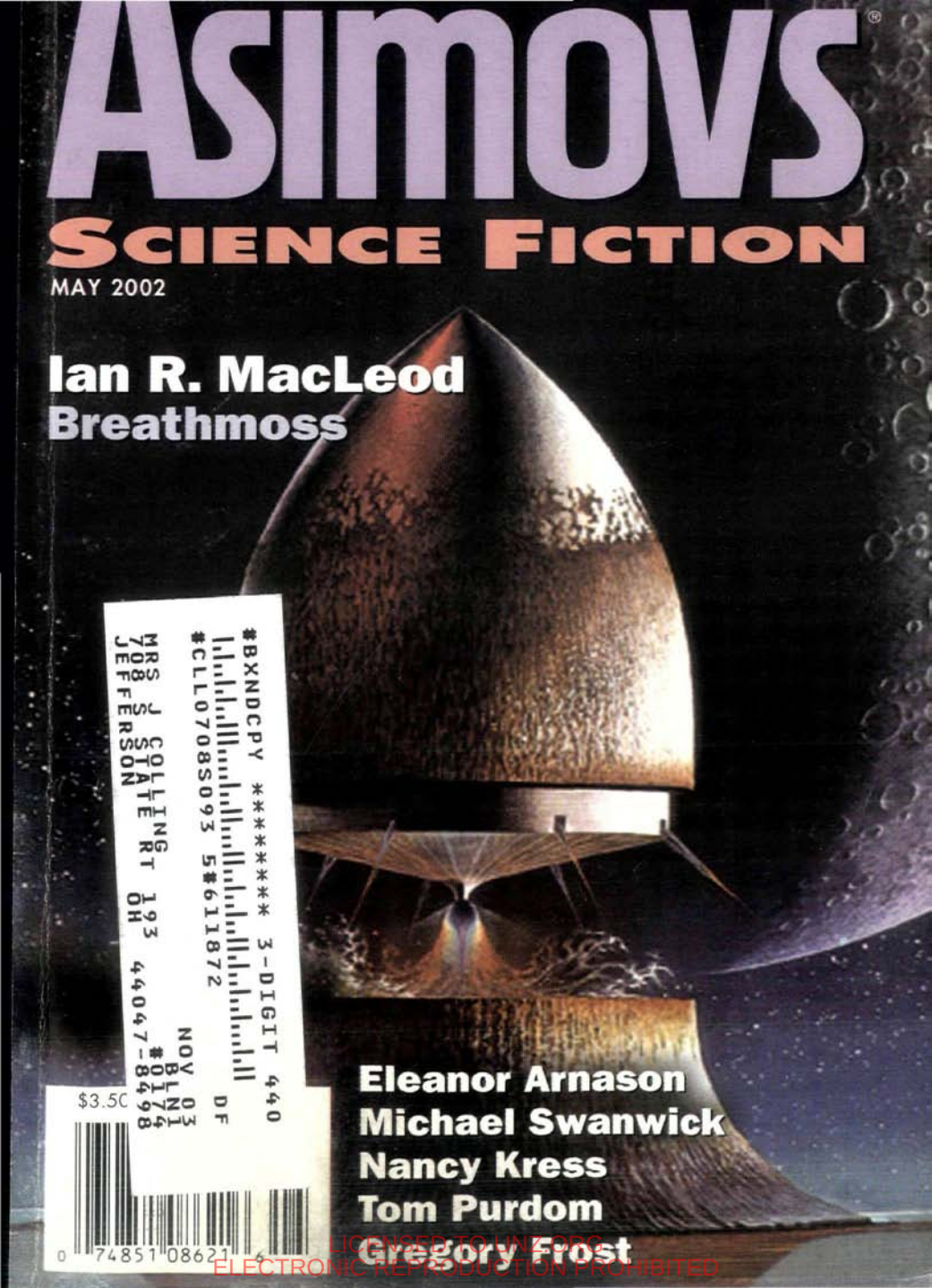

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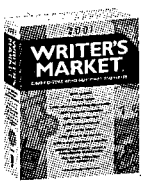

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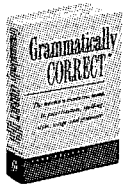

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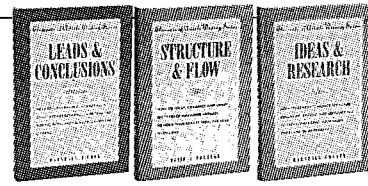

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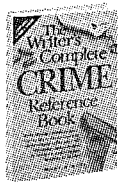

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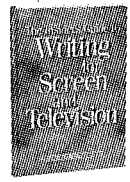

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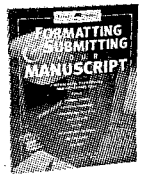

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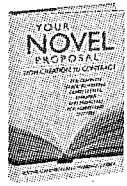

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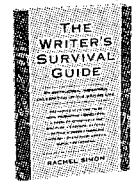

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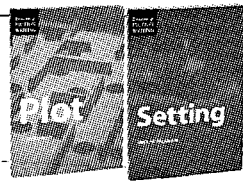

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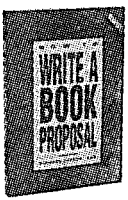

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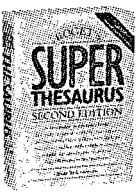

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

LET'S HEAR IT FOR PLUTO

So now they're trying to tell us that Pluto isn't really a planet. I don't like that. I've always had a soft spot in my heart for Pluto, and after a lifetime of thinking of it as some sort of Ultima Thule of our solar system I'm not willing to have it demoted. I remember all too fondly all those pulp-magazine space operas of my boyhood that told tales of the Nine Planets League and the like. Pluto may be a funny little place, but its delegate will always belong at the council-table of the Nine Planets League in my mind, and it's simply too late for me to begin slipping phrases like "the outermost of the solar system's eight planets" into my work.

The sinister forces behind the downgrading of Pluto are based in that bastion of scientific subversion, New York's American Museum of Natural History. The museum's Hayden Planetarium has built a lovely new adjunct, the Rose Center for Earth and Space, as a replacement for the beloved planetarium building of my Pleistocene childhood. The new building opened in February 2000—and it was not until the following year, apparently, that anyone noticed that the Rose had deleted Pluto from the roster of planets.

Oh, it doesn't say so in that many words. You will not find any placards on the wall that declare, "This is Pluto, formerly considered a planet, but now deemed by us to be something much less significant." But you won't see any sign indicating that the Rose believes that there ought to be representatives from Pluto at the meetings of the Nine Planets League, either. The planetarium's exhibits refer to a group of four planets called the "terrestrial planets"—Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars—and a second group of "outer planets," the gas giants Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune. That adds up to eight. The planetarium's diagram of the solar system shows eight orbits, not nine, around the Sun.

Where's Pluto? Pluto shows up in a sort of footnote: "Beyond the outer planets is the Kuiper Belt of comets, a disk of small, icy worlds including Pluto." Not one of *our* planets any more. Cast out from the League. Simply a small, icy hunk of rock somewhere out there at the edge of interstellar space.

This seems to be a unilateral decision on the part of the Hayden Planetarium. The International Astronomical Union, the Paris-based professional society of astronomers, still lists Pluto among the worlds of the solar system. When a proposal came up in 1999 to designate Pluto as a "minor planet" which, so to speak, had one orbital foot in the solar system and one in the Kuiper Belt, it was firmly voted down, and the Astronomical Union released a statement saying, "This process was explicitly designed to not change Pluto's status as a planet." (Was the split infinitive the work of a translator, I wonder?)

But the new Rose Center gives Pluto the downgrade anyway. Dr. Neil de Grasse Tyson, the director of the Hayden Planetarium, notes that "We're not that confrontational

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about it. You actually have to pay attention to make note of this."

Well, attention is being paid, now. From Dr. S. Alan Stern, the director of the Southwest Research Institute's space studies department in Boulder, Colorado, comes the blunt comment, "It's absurd. The astronomical community has settled this issue. There's no issue." Dr. Richard B. Binzel, professor of planetary science at MIT, says, "They went too far in demoting Pluto, way beyond what the mainstream astronomers think." And from Dr. Laura Danly of the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, which is constructing a new space science center due to open in 2003, comes the word, "We're sticking with Pluto. We like Pluto as a planet."

Dr. Tyson of the Hayden Planetarium offers by way of defense the precedent of the ex-planet Ceres, discovered in 1801 orbiting the sun between Mars and Jupiter. Ceres, though only about five hundred miles in diameter, met the definition of a planet—an astronomical body traveling in a roughly circular orbit around the Sun—and, since it neatly filled the space in the solar system where by all logic a planet should have been, it was duly enrolled in the roster of worlds. Three months later, though, a second small planet, Pallas, was noticed in the same general region of the sky, and two more, Juno and Vesta, within the next six years. Before long it became apparent that the territory between Mars and Jupiter was occupied by dozens, hundreds, eventually thousands of little worlds, evidently the debris of some vast planetary explosion. Having to look upon all of them as planets would make for an unwieldy situation; and so they were termed "asteroids" instead, and Ceres, so briefly a planet, was included among the group.

Pluto is bigger than Ceres—its di-

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ameter is fourteen hundred miles—but that still leaves it a veritable shrimp among planets. Its mass is only about a tenth of Earth's, and Earth is far from the biggest of the planets. There are a good many *moons* in the solar system, including our own, that are bigger than Pluto. Because Pluto is so small, some astronomers have theorized that it once was a moon of the much larger planet Neptune that somehow escaped and took up independent orbit around the Sun. This argument is supported by Pluto's long and very strange period of daily rotation. Pluto's "day" is 6.39 of our days long, whereas all the other planets rotate on their axes once every twenty-five hours or less. Pluto's slow rate of rotation has more in common with that of the moons of the outer worlds than it does with that of the other planets: Neptune's Triton rotates once every five days twenty-one hours, Uranus's Titania every eight days sixteen hours, and so on.

Even if Pluto is a runaway moon, though, its orbit is unquestionably centered on the Sun, and that, to me and a lot of other people, qualifies it as a planet. Not so, says Dr. Tyson of the Hayden. It is, he says, too trifling an object to be dignified with the title of planet. He regards it as analogous to Ceres, that is, a very minor world that belongs to some other classification, and prefers to cast it into the outer darkness of the Kuiper Belt. This, he asserts, actually upgrades its status "from puniest planet to king of the Kuiper Belt," that distant zone of cosmic debris, containing hundreds of small rocky objects, including about seventy—known as the Plutinos—that move in orbits similar to Pluto's. "I think it's happier that way," he says. "I'm convinced our approach will prevail. It makes too much scientific sense and too much pedagogical sense."

No. I say it's still a planet, and I sneer in the face of the Hayden Planetarium.

One reason I am so fond of Pluto, other than that its enigmatic presence among the family of worlds is far more interesting than if it were a mere part of a lot of interstellar spaghetti on the fringes of our solar system, is that it is the only planet that was discovered in my own lifetime, give or take a few years. Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn have been known since ancient times. Uranus, the first planet whose discoverer is known, was spotted by the British astronomer William Herschel while scanning the heavens on March 13, 1781. Certain irregularities in its orbit led scientists to suspect the gravitational influence of still another planet further out; in 1845 the French astronomer Urbain Leverrier calculated the probable mass and orbit of that hypothetical planet, and, using Leverrier's figures, Johann Galle of the Berlin University Observatory located it on September 23, 1846. It was given the name of Neptune.

Big as it was, Neptune did not have sufficient mass by itself to account for the irregularities in Uranus's orbit, and its own orbit was somewhat irregular too. So it was likely that one more planet must exist out there, and from the late nineteenth century onward many astronomers carried out extensive searches for it, without any success. It was not until 1930 that Pluto was found. (I myself came along somewhat later in the 1930s, but I have always regarded Pluto as my contemporary.)

A twenty-three-year-old astronomer named Clyde Tombaugh, on the staff of the Lowell Observatory in Arizona, was the discoverer of the ninth planet. He used a device called a blink comparator, which allows two astronomical photographs to be placed side by side and viewed

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through a single eyepiece. First one picture is lit, then the other; the mind retains the image of one during the split-second jump to the other, and so any object that has moved between the taking of one photo and the next will appear to leap back and forth with each blink of the lighting.

On the afternoon of February 18, 1930, while blinking photographs that he had taken on January 23 and 29, Tombaugh suddenly noticed a faint object "popping in and out of the background. . . . 'That's it!' I exclaimed to myself." And it was. On March 13, 1930—the 149th anniversary of Herschel's discovery of Uranus—the Lowell announced the finding of "an object beyond Neptune" that was apparently a planet. An eleven-year-old British girl offered a name for the newfound world: Pluto, for the Roman god of the dead, brother to Jupiter and Neptune and the lord of a realm of eternal darkness.

A dark realm indeed, billions of miles out from the center of the solar system. Pluto travels on an orbit so vast that it takes 248.5 years to make a single revolution around the Sun. It is a tiny world, with a mass just .0024 that of Earth, and its orbit is a weirdly eccentric one that brings it, from time to time, inside the orbit of its neighbor world Neptune.

Astronomers think that little Pluto probably has a solid core of rock constituting about a quarter of its mass, with a thick blanket of frozen water above it, and perhaps a thin shell of frozen methane and ammonia covering the surface. The temperature on Pluto is, of course, pretty chilly—very likely dropping in the Plutonian winter to the vicinity of -200 degrees C. (roughly -430 degrees F.), which is just 30 or 40 degrees above absolute zero. (I once wrote a story proposing that Pluto was inhabited by creatures that had superconductive liquid helium II flowing in their veins—a nifty idea, but not one that I consider particularly probable. Larry Niven had a different take on the same theme a long while back, in "Wait it Out.")

An interesting place, yes. And a planet that marks, for me and for a lot of other people, the boundary between our solar system and the rest of the universe. We may yet find a tenth planet, dark and huge, orbiting the Sun somewhere beyond Pluto, and that surely would rob Pluto of its status as the outermost of our worlds. But to take that status away now, removing it from planetary rank and dumping it into the chaotic miscellany that is the Kuiper Belt—oh, no, no, no, Hayden Planetarium. Say it ain't so. ○

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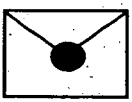

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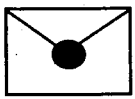

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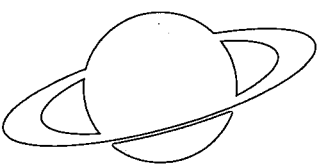

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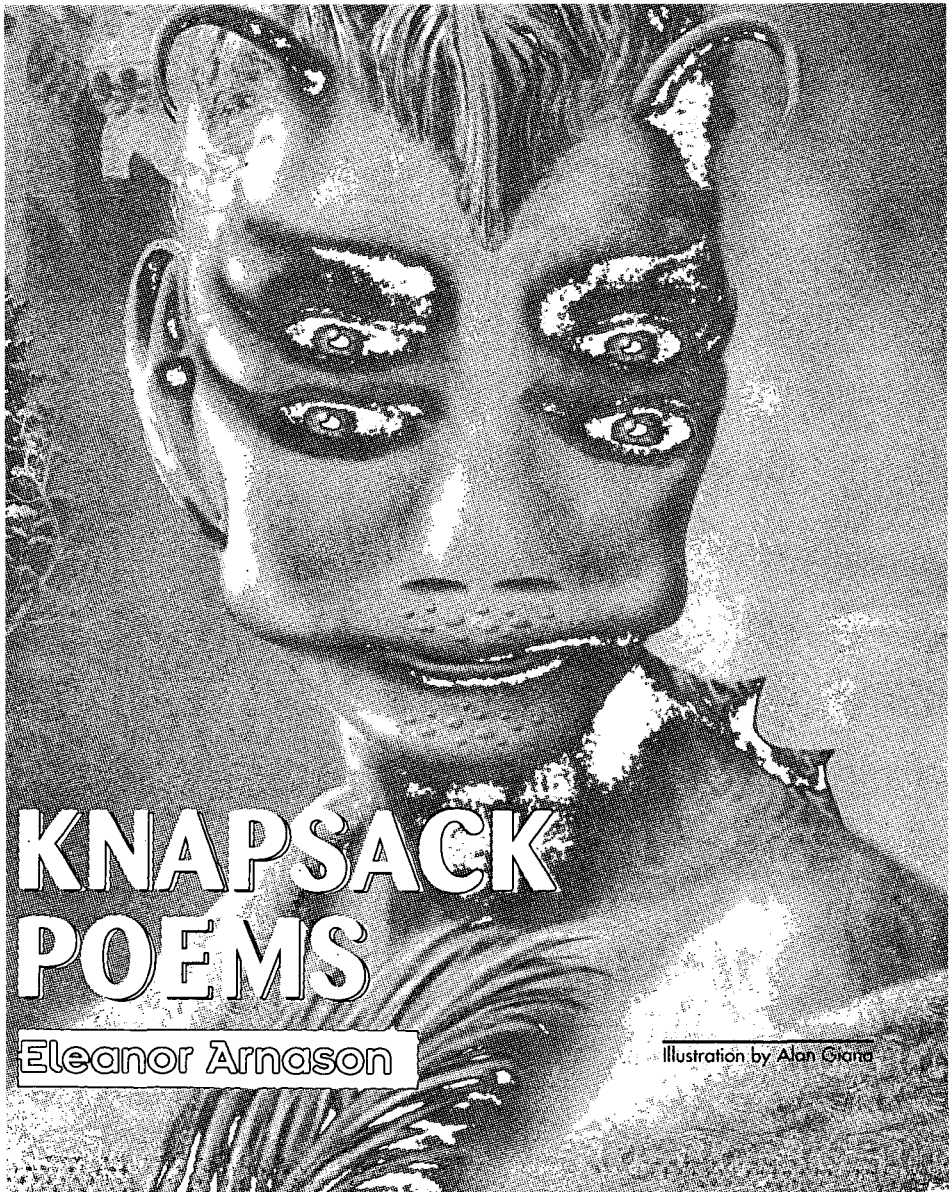

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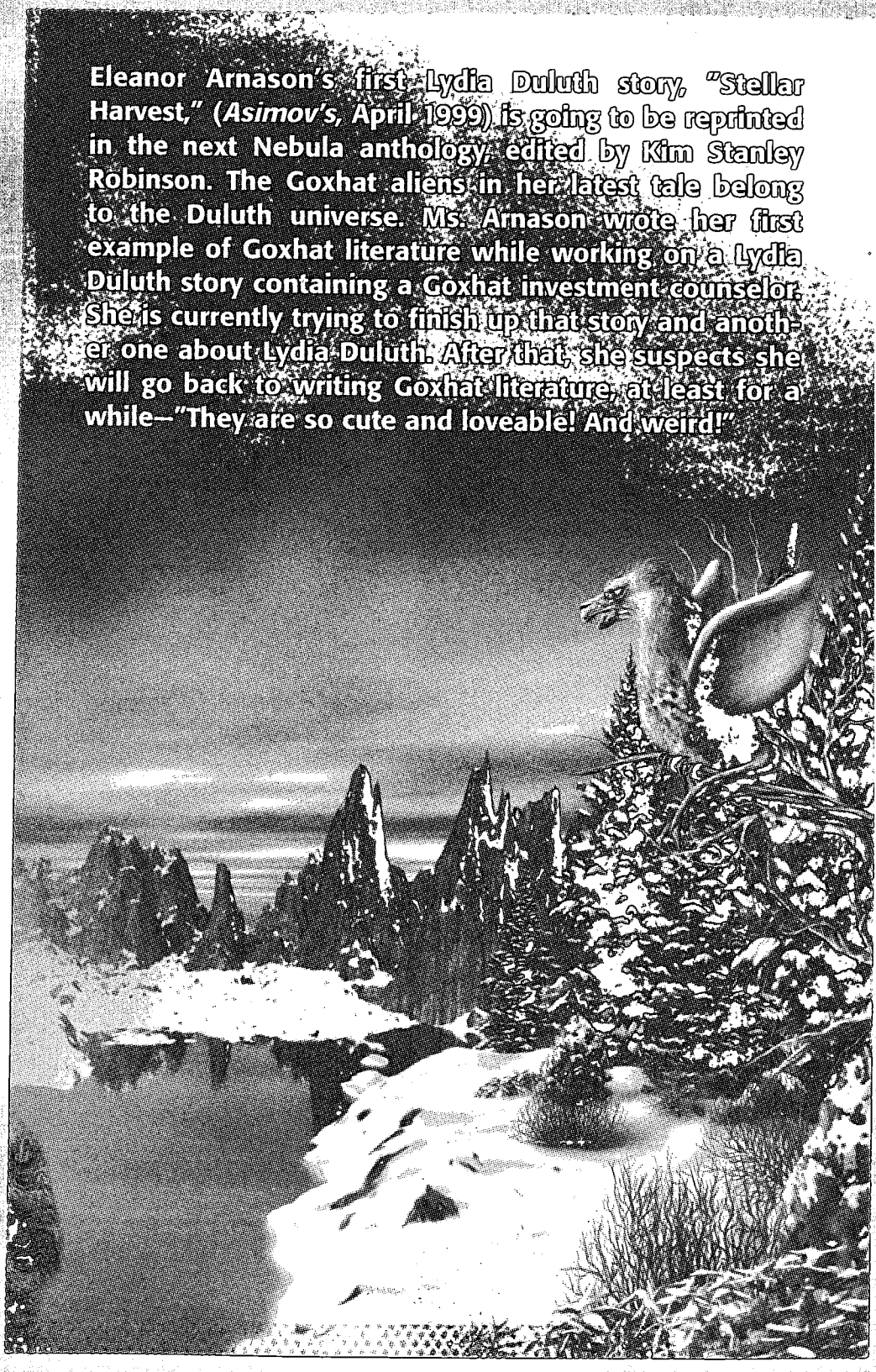

Eleanor Arnason's first Lydia Duluth story, "Stellar Harvest," (*Asimov's*, April 1999) is going to be reprinted in the next Nebula anthology, edited by Kim Stanley Robinson. The Goxhat aliens in her latest tale belong to the Duluth universe. Ms. Arnason wrote her first example of Goxhat literature while working on a Lydia Duluth story containing a Goxhat investment counselor. She is currently trying to finish up that story and another one about Lydia Duluth. After that, she suspects she will go back to writing Goxhat literature, at least for a while—"They are so cute and loveable! And weird!"

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Within this person of eight bodies, thirty-two eyes, and the usual number of orifices and limbs, resides a spirit as restless as gossamer on wind. In youth, I dreamed of fame as a merchant-traveler. In later years, realizing that many of my parts were prone to motion sickness, I thought of scholarship or accounting. But I lacked the Great Determination that is necessary for both trades. My abilities are spontaneous and brief, flaring and vanishing like a falling star. For me to spend my life adding numbers or looking through dusty documents would be like "lighting a great hall with a single lantern bug" or "watering a great garden with a drop of dew."

Finally, after consulting the care-givers in my crèche, I decided to become a traveling poet. It's a strenuous living and does not pay well, but it suits me.

Climbing through the mountains west of Ibri, I heard a *wishik* call, then saw the animal, its wings like white petals, perched on a bare branch.

"Is that tree flowering
So late in autumn?
Ridiculous idea!
I long for dinner."

One of my bodies recited the poem. Another wrote it down, while still others ranged ahead, looking for signs of habitation. As a precaution, I carried cudgels as well as pens and paper. One can never be sure what will appear in the country west of Ibri. The great poet Raging Fountain died there of a combination of diarrhea and malicious ghosts. Other writers, hardly less famous, have been killed by monsters or bandits, or, surviving these, met their end at the hands of dissatisfied patrons.

The Bane of Poets died before my birth. Its[1] ghost or ghosts offered Raging Fountain the fatal bowl of porridge. But other patrons still remain "on steep slopes and in stony dales."

"Dire the telling
Of patrons in Ibri:
Bone-breaker lurks
High on a mountain.
Skull-smasher waits
In a shadowy valley.
Better than these
The country has only
Grasper, Bad-bargain,
And Hoarder-of-Food."

Why go to such a place, you may be wondering? Beyond Ibri's spiny mountains lie the wide fields of Greater and Lesser Ib, prosperous lands well-known for patronage of the arts.

Late in the afternoon, I realized I would find no refuge for the night. Dark snow-clouds hid the hills in front of me. Behind me, low in the south, the

[1] Goxhat units, or "persons" as the goxhat say, comprise four to sixteen bodies and two or three sexes. The Bane of Poets was unusual in being entirely neuter, which meant it could not reproduce. According to legend, it was reproductive frustration and fear of death that made The Bane so dangerous to poets.

Why poets? They produce two kinds of children, those of body and those of mind, and grasp in their pincers the gift of undying fame.

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sun shed pale light. My shadows, long and many-limbed, danced ahead of me on the rutted road.

My most poetic self spoke:

"The north is blocked
By clouds like boulders.
A winter sun
Casts shadows in my way."

Several of my other selves frowned. My scribe wrote the poem down with evident reluctance.

"Too obvious," muttered a cudgel-carrier.

Another self agreed. "Too much like Raging Fountain in his/her mode of melancholy complaint."

Far ahead, a part of me cried alarm. I suspended the critical discussion and hurried forward in a clump, my clubs raised and ready for use.

Soon, not even breathless, I stopped at a place I knew by reputation: the Tooth River. Wide and shallow, it ran around pointed stones, well-exposed this time of year and as sharp as the teeth of predators. On the far side of the river were bare slopes that led toward cloudy mountains. On the near side of the river, low cliffs cast their shadows over a broad shore. My best scout was there, next to a bundle of cloth. The scout glanced up, saw the rest of me, and—with deft fingers—undid the blanket folds.

Two tiny forms lay curled at the blanket's center. A child of one year, holding itself in its arms.

"Alive?" I asked myself.

The scout crouched closer. "One body is and looks robust. The other body—" my scout touched it gently "—is cold."

Standing among myself, I groaned and sighed. There was no problem understanding what had happened. A person had given birth. Either the child had been unusually small, or the other parts had died. For some reason, the parent had been traveling alone. Maybe he/she/it had been a petty merchant or a farmer driven off the land by poverty. If not these, then a wandering thief or someone outlawed for heinous crimes. A person with few resources. In any case, he/she/it had carried the child to this bitter place, where the child's next-to-last part expired.

Imagine standing on the river's icy edge, holding a child who had become a single body. The parent could not bear to raise an infant so incomplete! What parent could? One did no kindness by raising such a cripple to be a monster among ordinary people.

Setting the painful burden down, the parent crossed the river.

I groaned a second time. My most poetic self said:

"Two bodies are not enough;
One body is nothing."

The rest of me hummed agreement. The poet added a second piece of ancient wisdom:

"Live in a group
Or die."

I hummed a second time.

The scout lifted the child from its blanket. "It's female."

The baby woke and cried, waving her four arms, kicking her four legs, and urinating. My scout held her as far away as possible. Beyond doubt, she was a fine, loud, active mite! But incomplete. "Why did you wake her?" asked a cudgel-carrier. "She should be left to die in peace."

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"No," said the scout. "She will come with me."

"Me! What do you mean by me?" my other parts cried.

There is neither art nor wisdom in a noisy argument. Therefore, I will not describe the discussion that followed as night fell. Snowflakes drifted from the sky—slowly at first, then more and more thickly. I spoke with the rudeness people reserve for themselves in privacy; and the answers I gave myself were sharp indeed. Words like pointed stones, like the boulders in Tooth River, flew back and forth. Ah! The wounds I inflicted and suffered! Is anything worse than internal dispute?

The scout would not back down. She had fallen in love with the baby, as defective as it was. The cudgel-bearers, sturdy males, were outraged. The poet and the scribe, refined neuters, were repulsed. The rest of me was female and a bit more tender.

I had reached the age when fertile eggs were increasingly unlikely. In spite of my best efforts, I had gained neither fame nor money. What respectable goxhat would mate with a vagabond like me? What crèche would offer to care for my offspring? Surely this fragment of a child was better than nothing.

"No!" said my males and neuters. "This is not a person! One body alone can never know togetherness or integration!"

But my female selves edged slowly toward the scout's opinion. Defective the child certainly was. Still, she was alive and goxhat, her darling little limbs waving fiercely and her darling mouth making noises that would shame a monster.

Most likely, she would die. The rest of her had. Better that she die in someone's arms, warm and comfortable, than in the toothy mouth of a prowling predator. The scout rewrapped the child in the blanket.

It was too late to ford the river. I made camp under a cliff, huddling together for warmth, my arms around myself, the baby in the middle of the heap I made.

When morning came, the sky was clear. Snow sparkled everywhere. I rose, brushed myself off, gathered my gear, and crossed the river. The water was low, as I expected this time of year, but ice-cold. My feet were numb by the time I reached the far side. My teeth chattered on every side like castanets. The baby, awakened by the noise, began to cry. The scout gave her a sweet cake. That stopped the crying for a while.

At mid-day, I came in sight of a keep. My hearts lifted with hope. Alas! Approaching it, I saw the walls were broken.

The ruination was recent. I walked through one of the gaps and found a courtyard, full of snowy heaps. My scouts spread out and investigated. The snow hid bodies, as I expected. Their eyes were gone, but most of the rest remained, preserved by cold and the season's lack of bugs.

"This happened a day or two ago," my scouts said. "Before the last snow, but not by much. *Wishik* found them and took what they could, but didn't have time—before the storm—to find other predators and lead them here. This is why the bodies are still intact. The *wishik* can pluck out eyes, but skin is too thick for them to penetrate. They need the help of other animals, such as *hirg*." One of the scouts crouched by a body and brushed its rusty back hair. "I won't be able to bury these. There are too many."

"How many goxhat are here?" asked my scribe, taking notes.

"It's difficult to say for certain. Three or four, I suspect, all good-sized. A parent and children would be my guess."

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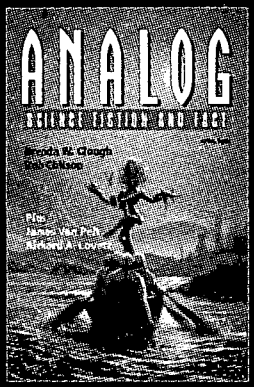

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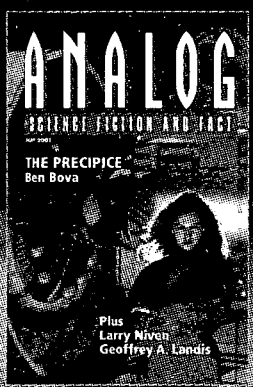

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I entered the keep building and found more bodies. Not many. Most of the inhabitants had fallen in the courtyard. There was a nursery with scattered toys, but no children.

"Ah! Ah!" I cried, reflecting on the briefness of life and the frequency with which one encounters violence and sorrow.

My poet said:

"Broken halls
and scattered wooden words.
How will the children
learn to read and write?"[2]

Finally I found a room with no bodies or toys, nothing to remind me of mortality. I lit a fire and settled for the night. The baby fussed. My scout cleaned her, then held her against a nursing bud—for comfort only; the scout had no milk. The baby sucked. I ate my meager rations. Darkness fell. My thirty-two eyes reflected firelight. After a while, a ghost arrived. Glancing up, I saw it in the doorway. It looked quite ordinary: three goxhat bodies with rusty hair.

"Who are you?" one of my scouts asked.

"The former owner of this keep, or parts of her. My name was Content-in-Solitude; and I lived here with three children, all lusty and numerous.—Don't worry."

My cudgel-carriers had risen, cudgels in hand.

"I'm a good ghost. I'm still in this world because my death was so recent and traumatic. As soon as I've gathered myself together, and my children have done the same, we'll be off to a better place. [3]

"I stopped here to tell you our names, so they will be remembered."

"Content-in-Solitude," muttered my scribe, writing.

"My children were Virtue, Vigor, and Ferric Oxide. Fine offspring! They should have outlived me. Our killer is Bent Foot, a bandit in these mountains. He took my grandchildren to raise as his own, since his female parts—all dead now—produced nothing satisfactory. Mutant children with twisted feet and nasty dispositions! No good will come of them; and their ghosts will make these mountains worse than ever. Tell my story, so others may be warned."

"Yes," my poet said in agreement. The rest of me hummed.

For a moment, the three bodies remained in the doorway. Then they drew

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[2] This translation is approximate. Like humans, goxhat use wooden blocks to teach their children writing. However, their languages are ideogrammic, and the blocks are inscribed with entire words. Their children build sentences shaped like walls, towers, barns and other buildings. Another translation of the poem would be:

Broken walls.
Broken sentences.
Ignorant offspring.
Alas!

[3] According to the goxhat, when a person dies, his/her/its goodness becomes a single ghost known as "The Harmonious Breath" or "The Collective Spirit." This departs the world for a better place. But a person's badness remains as a turbulent and malicious mob, attacking itself and anyone else who happens along.

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together and merged into one. "You see! It's happening! I am becoming a single ghost! Well, then. I'd better be off to find the rest of me, and my children, and a better home for all of us."

The rest of the night was uneventful. I slept well, gathered around the fire, warmed by its embers and my bodies' heat. If I had dreams, I don't remember them. At dawn, I woke. By sunrise, I was ready to leave. Going out of the building, I discovered three *hirg* in the courtyard: huge predators with shaggy, dull-brown fur. *Wishik* fluttered around them as they tore into the bodies of Content and her children. I took one look, then retreated, leaving the keep by another route.

That day passed in quiet travel. My poet spoke no poetry. The rest of me was equally silent, brooding on the ruined keep and its ghost.

I found no keep to shelter me that night or the next or the next. Instead, I camped out. My scout fed the baby on thin porridge. It ate and kept the food down, but was becoming increasingly fretful and would not sleep unless the scout held it to a nursing bud. Sucking on the dry knob of flesh, it fell asleep.

"I don't mind," said the scout. "Though I'm beginning to worry. The child needs proper food."

"Better to leave it by the way," a male said. "Death by cold isn't a bad ending."

"Nor death by dehydration," my other male added.

The scout looked stubborn and held the child close.

Four days after I left the ruined keep, I came to another building, this one solid and undamaged.

My scribe said, "I know the lord here by reputation. She is entirely female and friendly to the womanly aspects of a person. The neuter parts she tolerates. But she doesn't like males. Her name is The Testicle Straightener."

My cudgel-carriers shuddered. The scribe and poet looked aloof, as they inevitably did in such situations. Clear-eyed and rational, free from sexual urges, they found the rest of me a bit odd.

The scout carrying the baby said, "The child needs good food and warmth and a bath. For that matter, so do I."

Gathering myself together, I strode to the gate and knocked. After several moments, it swung open. Soldiers looked out. There were two of them: one tall and grey, the other squat and brown. Their bodies filled the entrance, holding spears and axes. Their eyes gleamed green and yellow.

"I am a wandering poet, seeking shelter for the night. I bring news from the south, which your lord might find useful."

The eyes peered closely, then the soldiers parted—grey to the left, brown to the right—and let me in.

Beyond the gate was a snowy courtyard. This one held no bodies. Instead, the snow was trampled and urine-marked. A living place! Though empty at the moment, except for the two soldiers who guarded the gate.

I waited in an anxious cluster. At length, a servant arrived and looked me over. "You need a bath and clean clothes. Our lord is fastidious and dislikes guests who stink. Come with me."

I followed the servant into the keep and down a flight of stairs. Metal lamps were fastened to the walls. Most were dark, but a few shone, casting a dim light. The servant had three sturdy bodies, all covered with black hair.

Down and down. The air grew warm and moist. A faint, distinctive aroma filled it.

"There are hot springs in this part of Ibri," the servant said. "This keep

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was built on top of one; and there is a pool in the basement, which always steams and smells."

Now I recognized the aroma: rotten eggs.

We came to a large room, paved with stone and covered by a broad, barrel vault. Metal lanterns hung from the ceiling on chains. As was the case with the lamps on the stairway, most were dark. But a few flickered dimly. I could see the bathing pool: round and carved from bedrock. Steps went down into it. Wisps of steam rose.

"Undress," said the servant. "I'll bring soap and towels."

I complied eagerly. Only my scout hesitated, holding the baby.

"I'll help you with the mite," said my scribe, standing knee-deep in hot water.

The scout handed the baby over and undressed.

Soon I was frolicking in the pool, diving and spouting. Cries of joy rang in the damp, warm room. Is anything better than a hot bath after a journey?

The scout took the baby back and moved to the far side of the pool. When the servant returned, the scout sank down, holding the baby closely, hiding it in shadow. Wise mite, it did not cry!

The rest of me got busy, scrubbing shoulders and backs. Ah, the pleasure of warm lather!

Now and then, I gave a little yip of happiness. The servant watched with satisfaction, his/her/its arms piled high with towels.

On the far side of the pool, my best scout crouched, nursing the babe on a dry bud and watching the servant with hooded eyes.

At last, I climbed out, dried off, and dressed. In the confusion—there was a lot of me—the scout managed to keep the baby concealed. Why, I did not know, but the scout was prudent and usually had a good reason for every action, though parts of me still doubted the wisdom of keeping the baby. There would be time to talk all of this over, when the servant was gone.

He/she/it led me up a new set of stairs. The climb was long. The servant entertained me with the following story.

The keep had a pulley system, which had been built by an ingenious traveling plumber. This lifted buckets of hot water from the spring to a tank on top of the keep. From there the water descended through metal pipes, carried by the downward propensity that is innate in water. The pipes heated every room.

"What powers the pulley system?" my scribe asked, notebook in hand.

"A treadmill," said the servant.

"And what powers the treadmill?"

"Criminals and other people who have offended the lord. No keep in Ibri is more comfortable," the servant continued with pride. "This is what happens when a lord is largely or entirely female. As the old proverb says, male bodies give a person forcefulness. Neuter bodies give thoughtfulness and clarity of vision. But nurture and comfort come from a person's female selves."

Maybe, I thought. But were the people in the treadmill comfortable?

The servant continued the story. The plumber had gone east to Ib and built other heated buildings: palaces, public baths, hotels, hospitals, and crèches. In payment for this work, several of the local lords mated with the plumber; and the local crèches vied to raise the plumber's children, who were numerous and healthy.

"A fine story, with a happy ending," I said, thinking of my fragment of a child, nursing on the scout's dry bud. Envy, the curse of all artists and arti-

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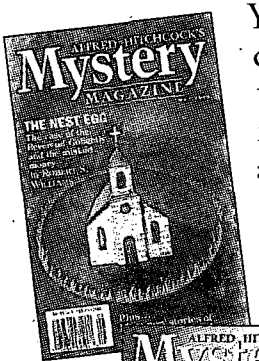

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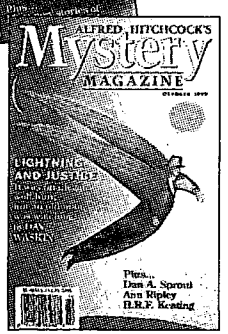

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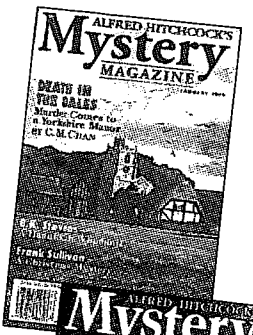

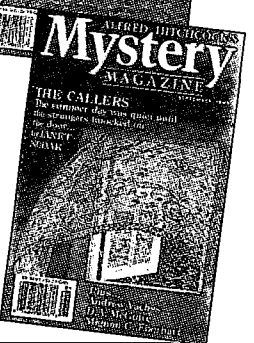

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sans, roiled in my hearts. Why had I never won the right to lay fertile eggs? Why were my purses empty? Why did I have to struggle to protect my testes and to stay off treadmills, while this plumber—surely not a better person than I—enjoyed fame, honor, and fertility?

The guest room was large and handsome, with a modern wonder next to it: a defecating closet. Inside the closet, water came from the wall in two metal pipes, which ended in faucets. "Hot and cold," said the servant, pointing. Below the faucets was a metal basin, decorated with reliefs of frolicking goxhat. Two empty buckets stood next to the basin.

The servant said, "If you need to wash something, your hands or feet or any other part, fill the basin with water. Use the buckets to empty the basin; and after you use the defecating throne, empty the buckets down it. This reduces the smell and gets rid of the dirty water. As I said, our lord is fastidious; and we have learned from her example. The plumber helped, by providing us with so much water.

"I'll wait in the hall. When you're ready to meet the lord, I'll guide you to her."

"Thank you," said my scribe, always courteous.

I changed into clean clothing, the last I had, and put bardic crowns on my heads[4] . Each crown came from a different contest, though all were minor. I had never won a really big contest. Woven of fine wool, with brightly colored tassels hanging down, the crowns gave me an appearance of dignity. My nimble-fingered scouts unpacked my instruments: a set of chimes, a pair of castanets and a bagpipe. Now I was ready to meet the lord.

All except my best scout, who climbed into the middle of a wide soft bed, child in arms.

"Why did you hide the mite?" asked my scholar.

"This keep seems full of rigid thinkers, overly satisfied with themselves and their behavior. If they saw the child they would demand an explanation. 'Why do you keep it? Can't you see how fragmentary it is? Can't you see that it's barely alive? Don't you know how to cut your losses?' I don't want to argue or explain."

"What is meant by 'I'?" my male parts asked. "What is meant by 'my' reasons?"

"This is no time for an argument," said the poet.

All of me except the scout went to meet the keep's famous lord.

The Straightener sat at one end of large hall: an elderly goxhat with frosted hair. Four parts of her remained, all sturdy, though missing a few pieces here and there: a foot, a hand, an eye or finger. Along the edges of the hall sat her retainers on long benches: powerful males, females, and neuters, adorned with iron and gold.

"Great your fame,
Gold-despoiler,
Bold straightener of scrota,
Wise lord of Ibri.

"Hearing of it,
I've crossed high mountains,
Anxious to praise
Your princely virtues."

[4] Actually, cerebral bulges. The goxhat don't have heads as humans understand the word.

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My poet stopped. Straightener leaned forward. "Well? Go on! I want to hear about my princely virtues."

"Give me a day to speak with your retainers and get exact details of your many achievements," the poet said. "Then I will be able to praise you properly."

The goxhat leaned back. "Never heard of me, have you? Drat! I was hoping for undying fame."

"I will give it to you," my poet said calmly.

"Very well," the lord said. "I'll give you a day, and if I like what you compose, I'll leave your male parts alone."

All of me thanked her. Then I told the hall about my stay at the ruined keep. The retainers listened intently. When I had finished, the lord said, "My long-time neighbor! Dead by murder! Well, death comes to all of us. When I was born, I had twenty parts. A truly large number! That is what I'm famous for, as well as my dislike of men, which is mere envy. My male bodies died in childhood, and my neuter parts did not survive early adulthood. By thirty, I was down to ten bodies, all female. The neuters were not much of a loss. Supercilious twits, I always thought. But I miss my male parts. They were so feisty and full of piss! When travelers come here, I set them difficult tasks. If they fail, I have my soldiers hold them, while I unfold their delicate, coiled testicles. No permanent damage is done, but the screaming makes me briefly happy."

My male bodies looked uneasy and shifted back and forth on their feet, as if ready to run. But the two neuters remained calm. My poet thanked the lord a second time, sounding confident. Then I split up and went in all directions through the hall, seeking information.

The drinking went on till dawn, and the lord's retainers were happy to tell me stories about the Straightener. She had a female love of comfort and fondness for children, but could not be called tender in any other way. Rather, she was a fierce leader in battle and a strict ruler, as exact as a balance or a straight-edge.

"She'll lead us against Bent Foot," one drunk soldier said. "We'll kill him and bring the children here. The stolen children, at least. I don't know about Bent Foot's spawn. It might be better for them to die. Not my problem. I let the lord make all the decisions, except whether or not I'm going to fart."

Finally, I went up to my room. My scout lay asleep, the baby in her arms. My male parts began to pace nervously. The rest of me settled to compose a poem.

As the sky brightened, the world outside began to wake and make noise. Most of the noise could be ignored, but there was a *wishik* under the eaves directly outside my room's window. Its shrill, repeating cry drove my poet to distraction. I could not concentrate on the poem.

Desperate, I threw things at the animal: buttons from my sewing kit, spare pens, an antique paperweight I found in the room. Nothing worked. The *wishik* fluttered away briefly, then returned and resumed its irritating cry.

At last my scout woke. I explained the problem. She nodded and listened to the *wishik* for a while. Then she fastened a string to an arrow and shot the arrow out the window. It hit the *wishik*. The animal gave a final cry. Grabbing the string, my scout pulled the beast inside.

"Why did I do that?" I asked.

"Because I didn't want the body to fall in the courtyard."

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"Why not?"

Before she could answer, the body at her feet expanded and changed its shape. Instead of the body of a dead *wishik,* I saw a grey goxhat body, pierced by the scout's arrow, dead.

My males swore. The rest of me exclaimed in surprise.

My scout said, "This is part of a wizard, no doubt employed by the keep's lord, who must really want to unroll my testicles, since she is willing to be unfair and play tricks. The *wishik* cry was magical, designed to bother me so much than I could not concentrate on my composition. If this body had fallen to the ground, the rest of the wizard would have seen it and known the trick had failed. As things are, I may have time to finish the poem." The scout looked at the rest of me severely. "Get to work."

My poet went back to composing, my scribe to writing. The poem went smoothly now. As the stanzas grew in number, I grew increasingly happy and pleased. Soon I noticed the pleasure was sexual. This sometimes happened, though usually when a poem was erotic. The god of poetry and the god of sex are siblings, though they share only one parent, who is called the All-Mother-Father.

Even though the poem was not erotic, my male and female parts became increasingly excited. Ah! I was rubbing against myself. Ah! I was making soft noises! The poet and scribe could not feel this sexual pleasure, of course, but the sight of the rest of me tumbling on the rug was distracting. Yes, neuters are clear-eyed and rational, but they are also curious; and nothing arouses their curiosity more than sex. They stopped working on the poem and watched as I fondled myself. [5]

Only the scout remained detached from sensuality and went into the defecating closet. Coming out with a bucket of cold water, the scout poured it over my amorous bodies.

I sprang apart, yelling with shock.

"This is more magic," the scout said. "I did not know a spell inciting lust could be worked at such a distance, but evidently it can. Every part of me that is male or female, go in the bathroom! Wash in cold water till the idea of sex becomes uninteresting! As for my neuter parts—" The scout glared. "Get back to the poem!"

"Why has one part of me escaped the spell?" I asked the scout.

"I did not think I could lactate without laying an egg first, but the child's attempts to nurse have caused my body to produce milk. As a rule, nursing mothers are not interested in sex, and this has proved true of me. Because of this, and the child's stubborn nursing, there is a chance of finishing the poem. I owe this child a debt of gratitude."

"Maybe," grumbled my male parts. The poet and scribe said, "I shall see."

The poem was done by sunset. That evening I recited it in the lord's hall. If I do say so myself, it was a splendid achievement. The *wishik's* cry was in it, as was the rocking up-and-down rhythm of a sexually excited goxhat. The second gave the poem energy and an emphatic beat. As for the first, every line ended with one of the two sounds in the *wishik's* ever-repeating, irritating cry. Nowadays, we call this repetition of sound "rhyming." But it had no name when I invented it.

[5] The goxhat believe masturbation is natural and ordinary. But reproduction within a person—inbreeding, as they call it—is unnatural and a horrible disgrace. It rarely happens. Most goxhat are not intrafertile, for reasons too complicated to explain here.

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When I was done, the lord ordered several retainers to memorize the poem. "I want to hear it over and over," she said. "What a splendid idea it is to make words ring against each other in this fashion! How striking the sound! How memorable! Between you and the traveling plumber, I will certainly be famous."

That night was spent like the first one, everyone except me feasting. I feigned indigestion and poured my drinks on the floor under the feasting table. The lord was tricky and liked winning. Who could say what she might order put in my cup or bowl, now that she had my poem?

When the last retainer fell over and began to snore, I got up and walked to the hall's main door. Sometime in the next day or so, the lord would discover that her wizard had lost a part to death and that one of her paperweights was missing. I did not want to be around when these discoveries were made.

Standing in the doorway, I considered looking for the treadmill. Maybe I could free the prisoners. They might be travelers like me, innocent victims of the lord's malice and envy and her desire for hot water on every floor. But there were likely to be guards around the treadmill, and the guards might be sober. I was only one goxhat. I could not save everyone. And the servant had said they were criminals.

I climbed the stairs quietly, gathered my belongings and the baby, and left through a window down a rope made of knotted sheets.

The sky was clear; the brilliant star we call Beacon stood above the high peaks, shedding so much light I had no trouble seeing my way. I set a rapid pace eastward. Toward morning, clouds moved in. The Beacon vanished. Snow began to fall, concealing my trail. The baby, nursing on the scout, made happy noises.

Two days later, I was out of the mountains, camped in a forest by an unfrozen stream. Water made a gentle sound, purling over pebbles. The trees on the banks were changers, a local variety that is blue in summer and yellow in winter. At the moment, their leaves were thick with snow. "Silver and gold," my poet murmured, looking up.

The scribe made a note.

A *wishik* clung to a branch above the poet and licked its wings. Whenever it shifted position, snow came down.

"The *wishik* cleans wings
As white as snow.
Snow falls on me, white
As a *wishik,*"

the poet said.

My scribe scribbled.

One of my cudgel-carriers began the discussion. "The Bane of Poets was entirely neuter. Fear of death made it crazy. Bent Foot was entirely male. Giving in to violence, he stole children from his neighbor. The last lord I encountered, the ruler of the heated keep, was female, malicious and unfair. Surely something can be learned from these encounters. A person should not be one sex entirely, but rather—as I am—a harmonious mixture of male, female, and neuter. But this child can't help but be a single sex."

"I owe the child a debt of gratitude," said my best scout firmly. "Without her, I would have had pain and humiliation, when the lord—a kind of lu-

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natic—unrolled my testes, as she clearly planned to do. At best, I would have limped away from the keep in pain. At worst, I might have ended in the lord's treadmill, raising water from the depths to make her comfortable."

"The question is a good one," said my scribe. "How can a person who is only one sex avoid becoming a monster? The best combination is the one I have: male, female, and both kinds of neuter. But even two sexes provide a balance."

"Other people—besides these three—have consisted of one sex," my scout said stubbornly. "Not all became monsters. It isn't sex that has influenced these lords, but the stony fields and spiny mountains of Ibri, the land's cold winters and ferocious wildlife. My various parts can teach the child my different qualities: the valor of the cudgel-carriers, the coolness of poet and scribe, the female tenderness that the rest of me has. Then she will become a single harmony."

The scout paused. The rest of me looked dubious. The scout continued.

"Many people lose parts of themselves through illness, accident, and war; and some of these live for years in a reduced condition. Yes, it's sad and disturbing, but it can't be called unnatural. Consider aging and the end of life. The old die body by body, till a single body remains. Granted, in many cases, the final body dies quickly. But not always. Every town of good size has a Gram or Gaffer who hobbles around in a single self.

"I will not give up an infant I have nursed with my own milk. Do I wish to be known as ungrateful or callous? I, who have pinned all my hope on honor and fame?"

I looked at myself with uncertain expressions. The *wishik* shook down more snow.

"Well, then," said my poet, who began to look preoccupied. Another poem coming, most likely. "I will take the child to a crèche and leave her there."

My scout scowled. "How well will she be cared for there, among healthy children, by tenders who are almost certain to be prejudiced against a mite so partial and incomplete? I will not give her up."

"Think of how much I travel," a cudgel-carrier said. "How can I take a child on my journeys?"

"Carefully and tenderly," the scout replied. "The way my ancestors who were nomads did. Remember the old stories! When they traveled, they took everything, even the washing pot. Surely their children were not left behind."

"I have bonded excessively to this child," said my scribe to the scout.

"Yes, I have. It's done and can't be undone. I love her soft baby-down, her four blue eyes, her feisty spirit. I will not give her up."

I conversed this way for some time. I didn't become angry at myself, maybe because I had been through so much danger recently. There is nothing like serious fear to put life into perspective. Now and then, when the conversation became especially difficult, a part of me got up and went into the darkness to kick the snow or to piss. When the part came back, he or she or it seemed better.

Finally I came to an agreement. I would keep the child and carry it on my journeys, though half of me remained unhappy with this decision.

How difficult it is to be of two minds! Still, it happens; and all but the insane survive such divisions. Only they forget the essential unity that underlies differences of opinion. Only they begin to believe in individuality.

The next morning, I continued into Ib.

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* * *

The poem I composed for the lord of the warm keep became famous. Its form, known as "ringing praise," was taken up by other poets. From it, I gained some fame, enough to quiet my envy; and the fame led to some money, which provided for my later years.

Did I ever return to Ibri? No. The land was too bitter and dangerous; and I didn't want to meet the lord of the warm keep a second time. Instead, I settled in Lesser Ib, buying a house on a bank of a river named It-Could-Be-Worse. This turned out to be an auspicious name. The house was cozy and my neighbors pleasant. The child played in my fenced-in garden, tended by my female parts. As for my neighbors, they watched with interest and refrained from mentioning the child's obvious disability.

"Lip-presser on one side.
Tongue-biter on t'other.
Happy I live,
Praising good neighbors."

I traveled less than previously, because of the child and increasing age. But I did make the festivals in Greater and Lesser Ib. This was easy traveling on level roads across wide plains. The Ibian lords, though sometimes eccentric, were nowhere near as crazy as the ones in Ibri and no danger to me or other poets. At one of the festivals, I met the famous plumber, who turned out to be a large and handsome, male and neuter goxhat. I won the festival crown for poetry, and he/it won the crown for ingenuity. Celebrating with egg wine, we became amorous and fell into each other's many arms.

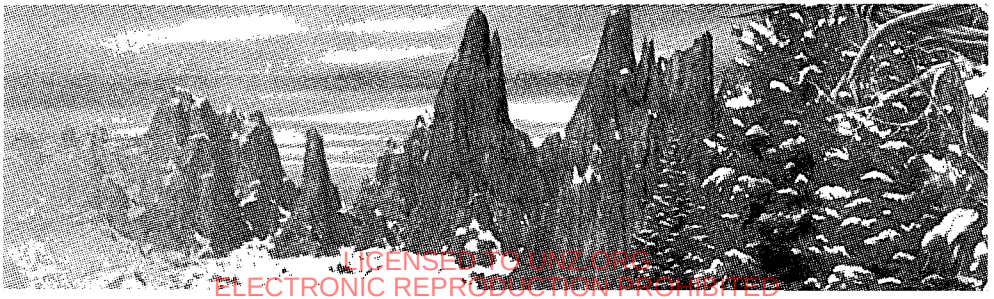
It was a fine romance and ended without regret, as did all my other romances. As a group, we goxhat are happiest with ourselves. In addition, I could not forget the prisoners in the treadmill. Whether the plumber planned it or not, he/it had caused pain for others. Surely it was wrong—unjust—for some to toil in darkness, so that others had a warm bed and hot water from a pipe?

I have to say, at times I dreamed of that keep: the warm halls, the pipes of water, the heated bathing pool and the defecating throne that had—have I forgotten to mention this?—a padded seat.

"Better to be here
In my cozy cottage.
Some comforts"
Have too high a cost.

I never laid any fertile eggs. My only child is Ap the Foundling, who is also known as Ap of One Body and Ap the Many-talented. As the last nickname suggests, the mite turned out well.

As for me, I became known as The Clanger and The *Wishit,* because of my famous rhyming poem. Other names were given to me as well: The Child Collector, The Nurturer, and The Poet Who Is Odd. ○



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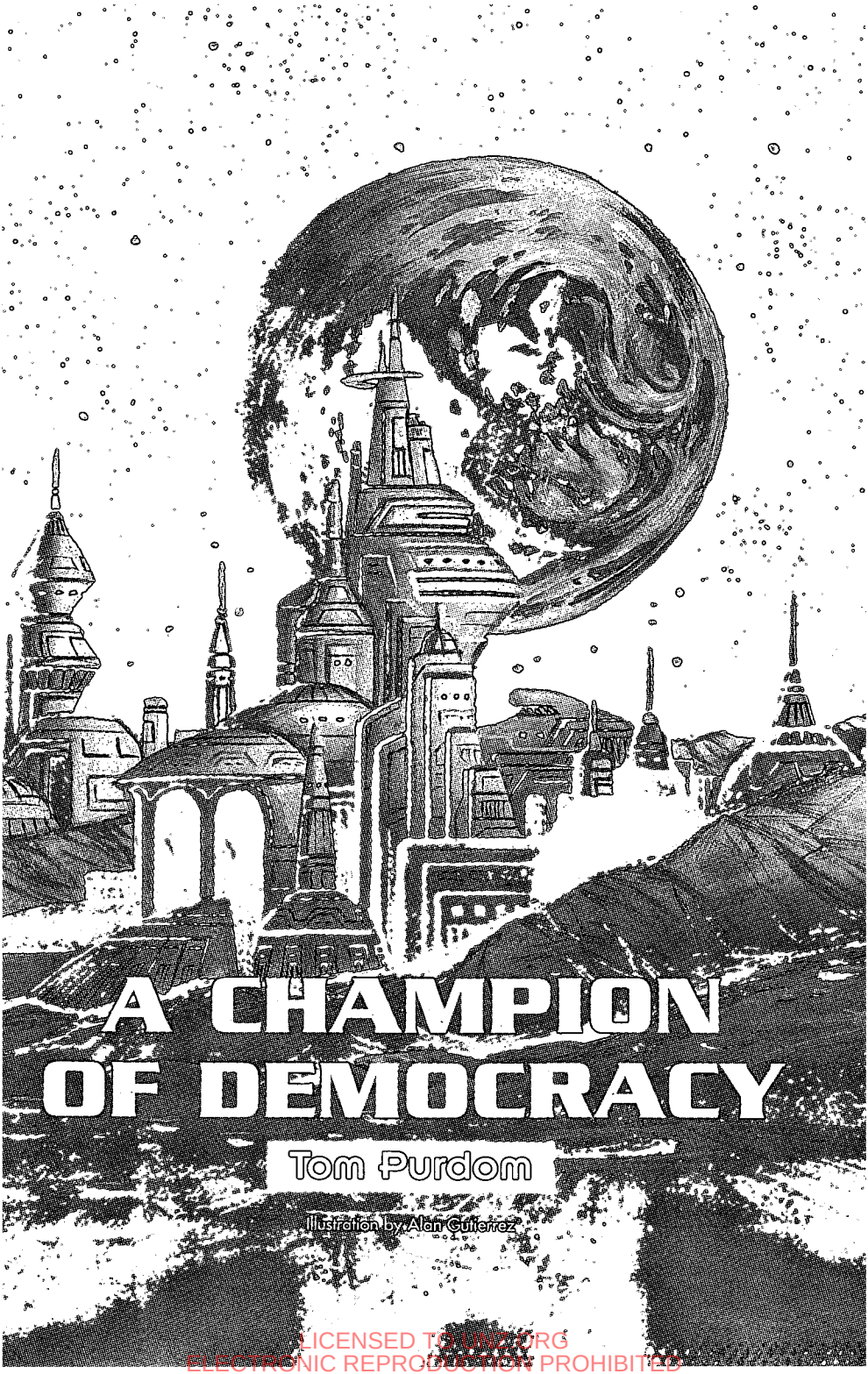

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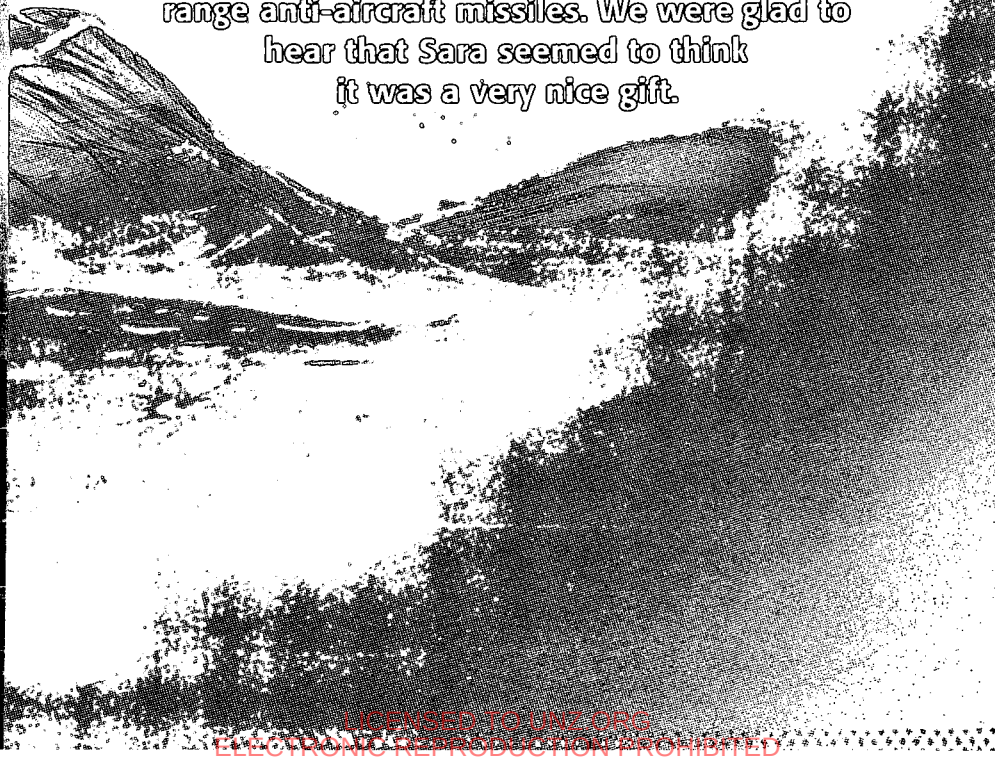
"Civilians" (August 2001), Tom Purdom has finished another Casanova tale, and sold a story to Gregory Benford's *Microcosms* anthology. His latest tale for us continues his exploration of the methods of future warfare. For his forty-first wedding anniversary, he recently gave his wife Sara an official coffee cup representative of current-day warfare. It's from the USS Hopper—named for Rear Admiral Grace Hopper, a key figure in the development of computer languages, and the first American woman admiral. The Hopper is an Arleigh Burke class destroyer equipped with an AEGIS computerized command and control system, Tomahawk land-attack missiles, Harpoon anti-ship missiles, and long range anti-aircraft missiles. We were glad to hear that Sara seemed to think it was a very nice gift.



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they made a number of references to his father's mental problems and Wen's own reputation for dubious enthusiasms.

"One does not fight wars by canvassing the populace," the Principal Speaker of the major opposition party pontificated. "The first requirement of war is centralized, coordinated planning. Our new First Administrator is beginning his term in office—which, *if we are fortunate,* will only last another few hours—with a proposal that is so eccentric it should be considered a symptom of clinically diagnosable derangement."

"We are engaged in a struggle which could decide the political fate of every city on the Moon," the Senior Analyst intoned. "We are opposing forces that are controlled by a single powerful brain. Our most recent surveys confirm that the population of our city includes several hundred citizens whose genetic enhancements have equipped them with brains that exceed the estimated mental power of our adversary by factors that range from 120 percent to 330 percent. Shouldn't we place our forces under the command of one of those minds? Wouldn't that make more sense than the bizarre scheme the First Administrator is proposing?"

For Wen Kang, the war was like every other struggle he had ever engaged in—a conflict between pure light and undiluted darkness. "On the one side," Wen orated, "we see a republic whose most honored citizens are scientists, artists, and entrepreneurs. On the other, we see a dark complex ruled by a woman who murdered twenty-three people in her rise to supreme power—a woman who personally cut the throats of five of her rivals at a banquet attended by two hundred guests. If we are to survive this test—if we are to lead our species into the glowing promise of an unimaginable future—we must make full use of our greatest strength: the creativity and imagination of a city inhabited by untrammeled human personalities!"

Fortunately, Wen's political skills were just as notable as his tendency to indulge in bombast. He and his two assistants had engaged in all the customary preparations before he had stepped before the honored members of the Legislative Assembly and uttered the first words of his speech. The leaders of the eight parties included in his coalition had received satisfactory positions in the cabinet. Certain changes in public policy had been offered and accepted. The proposal passed by a ten-vote margin.

The most prominent item in Wen Kang's office was a wall-sized, continuously updated map screen. The most conspicuous natural features on the map were a pair of craters: Copernicus in the lower left corner, and its smaller neighbor, Eratosthenes, in the upper right.

The other conspicuous feature was a pair of shaded areas that lay between the two craters. The black area represented the territory controlled by an army of molecular devices that had been creeping northward from Copernicus for the last five years. Most of the units in the army were too small to be seen with the naked eye, but they were as deadly as a mass of toxic microbes. An observer who traveled near the area might have spotted an occasional antenna or a few small toylike vehicles. In the space above the area, his eyes would have picked up pulses from miniature rocket motors and random glints reflected from objects that appeared to be scattered bits of dust. Other than that, the primary sign of the army's presence was a certain smoothing of the lunar surface.

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The army had been launched by Emma Fleuri, the current ruler of the Democratic Commonwealth of Copernicus. Its ultimate aim was the city that had grown up in Eratosthenes. Eventually, if it wasn't stopped, it would encircle Eratosthenes and cut off all surface communication. Then it would penetrate the crater wall. Its disassemblers would creep toward key components of the infrastructure that supported the city's inhabitants.

The government of the Convivial Republic of Eratosthenes had ignored the advance for almost four years. It had convinced itself the Copernicans were merely extending their domain over the useless lunar desert that occupied the space between the two cities. Then it had finally listened to a firebrand named Wen Kang and planted an army of its own in the field. The red area represented the current position of the Convivial Republic's own molecular forces.

The previous administration had appointed a Minister of External Security and placed him in charge of the war effort. The Minister had appointed a Director of External Security and the Director had been responsible for the actual maneuvering of the molecular force. Now Wen had placed the force under the direct control of the voting public.

Every twelve hours, every adult in the city could vote on the orders the Republic would transmit to its military forces. Anyone in the city could cast a vote. Anyone in the city could propose a new plan and post it on the discussion screens Wen had added to the public databanks. Interested citizens could offer general plans (concentrate on the right flank, attack sector B19) or they could propose something more detailed (attack sector B20 with 8,750 units, with 2,500 disassemblers in the first wave, followed by . . .)

This wasn't the first time citizens had been given direct control of a government operation. Some of the experimental societies developing in the asteroid belt did everything that way. There had even been a twenty-year period when the Czechs had run their economy by direct democracy, with the electorate casting biweekly votes on three basic interest rates. No one had ever tried to run a *war* by direct democracy, however. Wen had researched the databanks all the way back to the last quarter of the 1900s. The closest thing he had found had been experiments based on games and simulations.

The Director of External Security had been horrified when she'd seen his proposal for the War Poll.

"War isn't a *game,*" the Director said. "You can't even compare it to a business. You can recover from mistakes in economic policy. When you lose a *war,* you cease to exist!"

Wen had automatically replaced the Administrator of External Security when he became First Administrator. The Director of External Security had presented a tougher problem. On Earth, she had been a Tactical Lieutenant Colonel in one of the more celebrated international brigades. She had earned her rank in the forces that had been methodically calming the turbulent political units of the home planet. She had left Earth and emigrated to the Moon because Wen's predecessor as First Administrator had offered her a huge bonus. How could he possibly remove someone with her professional credentials?

"You and your staff will have the same opportunities as everyone else," Wen said. "I want you to continue doing everything you've been doing for the last thirteen months."

"And present our plans to everyone who thinks they're qualified to cast a vote every twelve hours?"

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"Everyone in this city knows what your qualifications are. You've been an advertisement for military professionalism from the moment you arrived. I suspect most of our people will vote for your plans merely because *you* proposed them. Anyone who wants to propose an alternative will have to come up with something that's so attractive the voters will choose it in spite of their feelings for you."

"We've presented you with the best strategy anyone could have worked out for you, given the options. I'm well aware my approach seems cautious and unimaginative. I realize the Copernicans have achieved a forty kilometer advance during the period I've been in charge of our efforts. But I can also assure you that we have analyzed *all* the alternatives. A strategy of delay is your only hope. The Copernican regime changes hands every six years on average. Sooner or later, someone will replace Emma Fleuri and her grandson."

Two million voting age adults lived in Eratosthenes. Three hundred thousand of them participated in the first round of the War Poll. Wen's preliminary surveys had indicated the normal participation rate would be two hundred and fifty thousand, but he had assumed the first votes would attract more interest. By the fourth day, the participation rate had dropped to two hundred and thirty thousand.

The Director of External Security relaxed some of her hostility when she saw the results of the first polls. Fifty-two percent of the voters had chosen the plans she and her staff had prepared.

"It's just like I told you," Wen said. "You don't have anything to worry about."

The Director smiled politely. She was a sturdy, practical woman who was proud of the fact that her parents had both been peasants. She had been dealing with politicians ever since she had first put on a uniform. The world would be a better place, in her opinion, if people avoided adventurous, imaginative personalities when they chose their leaders.

The military professionals dominated the discussion screens—and the decisions—for the next two tendays. Wen inspected every message anyone placed on the screens.

As he had expected, the discussion screens attracted their share of political paranoia. About 10 percent of the more emotional outpourings emanated from people who were convinced that the whole War Poll was a political trick and They were once again manipulating Us. *It's just one more thing they've discovered they can use against us. . . . Do they really think they can fool us with something like this? Do they really think we're that dumb?*

They do, one wag had replied. *And they're right!*

At the beginning of the third tenday, Wen noticed that a citizen named Nanette Aart seemed to be the center of a small flurry of activity. He had looked at her screens before and decided they were just another set of delusions—a grandiose jumble of complicated maneuvers created by a mind that seemed to think complexity was a sign of intelligence.

Now he discovered that her ideas had attracted the interest of a group which called itself the Thirteen Pedagogues. He had come across the Thirteen before, and nodded approvingly at the way they demolished some of the sillier ideas people were presenting. This time they seemed to think they had found something useful.

We have examined this young person's ideas in some detail, the Thirteen

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wrote. *We believe they should be subjected to a complete, intense analysis. Some of her proposals may look bizarre. Some are forbiddingly intricate. If you will muster a little patience and follow the reasoning in the rest of this report, we believe you will come to the same conclusion we have.*

Wen called up Nanette Aart's personal information from the databanks and discovered she was nine years old. Her parents were Dutch immigrants who had settled on the Moon just before she was born. Her mother had taught mathematics and published papers on something called hyperbias analysis.

Wen started skimming the Thirteen's report before he had finished the first five hundred words. It made more sense than Nanette Aart's proposals, but it was still cluttered with expositions that covered every possible response the enemy could take. *We open the attack by assaulting sector C22 with the following forces. . . . Assume the enemy counterattacks from sectors C23 and C24 with these forces. . . . Assume he tries a different approach and counterattacks from C24 and C22 itself with this mix of forces. . . . In that case . . .*

To Wen, it all looked too precise. Every little robot would have to get its orders without a hitch in communications or a glitch in the wording. The molecular forces were a kind of collective machine. The Thirteen Pedagogues were assuming every part would work perfectly.

A commentary from a writer named Lan Chih made similar observations. Lan Chih was especially contemptuous of any maneuver that had to be timed to the second. He believed that the Republic's only hope was a defensive effort founded on a massive buildup in its forces. If they put enough units in front of the Copernican forces, Lan Chih argued, the Copernican advance could be permanently halted.

There were other ideas on the screens that looked promising. None of them seemed to be generating any interest. The voters weren't going to abandon their allegiance to the professionals until someone offered them something that looked truly brilliant. Wen decided that it was time that he activated the second part of his plan.

None of the conspiracy paranoids had zeroed in on the management method Wen had actually chosen. Wen's personal political committee had organized seventy thousand voters into a solid bloc. When he gave the signal, the bloc would throw its support behind any proposal he selected—or help him veto anything he considered risky or farfetched.

Wen's political opponents might feel he was unstable and flighty. Some of his political allies might echo the sentiment. To most of the ordinary apolitical people who lived in his city, he was a high-spirited, glamorous figure who was noted for his achievements as a journalist adventurer. He could have put together a bloc that was 30 percent larger if he had thought it was necessary.

Most of the objects that glittered over the molecular battlefield were only three or four millimeters in diameter, but a small number of them were bigger than teacups. The larger units were miniature spaceships, with their own motors and an array of optical and electronic sensors. The smaller devices were shot out of magnetic projectors and recycled after they fell back to the surface.

In Wen's opinion, the military experts were trying to stop the Copernican advance by playing chess. They should instead be playing go—the formida-

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bly profound Chinese game in which you could lay your pieces on any open space on the board. In chess, armies clashed across a front. In go, you established positions at strategic points and tried to connect your own forces while you disrupted your opponent's.

Wen left a prearranged message with one of his more fervent allies, and a new advocate started agitating on the discussion screens.

I believe it is time we stopped playing chess, Dou Miriani announced. *I believe it is time we tapped the deepest roots of human culture and drew our inspiration from the sophistication and complexity of go. I propose we add a new element to the situation—a strike force built around several hundred of our Type 32 units.*

Type 32's were the biggest of the teacup size units. The strike force should be loaded with a cargo of seed units, Dou argued, and it should cross the enemy line and deposit the seeds in a thinly defended sector. The seeds would produce fighting units and the fighting units would expand the territory under their control and attack the enemy line from the rear. Other units would attack the front line in the same area, and eventually link up with the force that had been placed behind the line.

Lan Chih immediately leaped on the most obvious weakness in the idea. *And how do you propose to keep this plan a secret?* Lan Chih asked. *We know our enemy has spies who monitor everything we say here. Do you really think he will leave an area thinly defended when he knows we are going to attack it?*

Wen had passed the advocate's job to Dou Miriani because Dou was a veteran of years of discussion screen debates. Dou had deliberately ignored the criticisms people would raise when he had made his presentation. He knew his arguments would have more impact if he refuted criticisms after someone else brought them up.

Secrecy had been one of the more troubling aspects of Wen's schemes. He had withheld his assent to the War Poll until his staff had worked out procedures that would nullify the worst effects of open decision making. In this case, Dou argued, the strike force would have an effect on the battle even if it never actually struck. It would be placed where it could threaten several possible objectives. The Copernicans would have to use up resources strengthening all of them. If the force did engage in a strike, Dou could propose an objective in the last hour of the voting period and the attack could be launched as soon as the system posted the results of the poll.

Dou's proposal received 3 percent of the vote the first day he offered it. By the fifth day, it was receiving a steady 22 percent. Wen waited for a day when there were several popular proposals on the voting list. He then gave the word, and his bloc threw its support behind the strike force. Five days later, when the strike force was loaded and ready, his bloc forced through a decision to launch.

The super-brain that directed the Copernican forces belonged to a young man named Rafe Fleuri—the grandson of Emma Fleuri. Wen Kang had been in error when he had claimed Emma Fleuri had killed twenty-three people in her rise to eminence. Her grandson could name twenty-seven.

Rafe could have personally verified that his grandmother had cut the throats of five guests at a banquet. One of the victims had been his sister. She had been sitting across the table from him when Emma Fleuri drew the knife across her neck.

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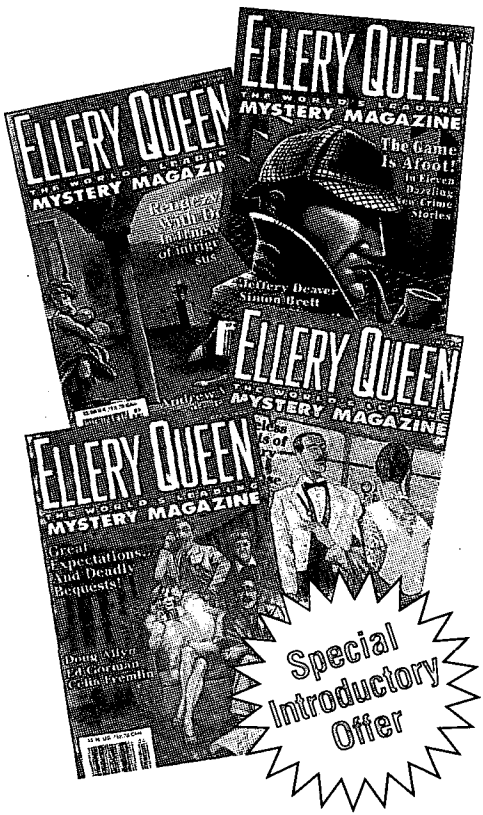

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Rafe spent most of his days sitting in a lounge chair with two neural/electronic interfaces fastened to his forehead. Information on the military situation flowed across his brain at forty-three megabytes per minute—a paltry figure by electronic standards, but an overwhelming advantage in any contest that pitted him against unmodified humans. Rafe's genetic intelligence potential had been enhanced by a factor of three. It wasn't the strongest enhancement possible, but it had been the best the genetic designers could do with one of Emma Fleuri's linear descendants.

Rafe had spotted six areas that the enemy strike force could attack. He had made no attempt to strengthen the defenses around any of them. Instead, he had created a mobile defensive force and developed defensive programs for each area.

Projectors launched interceptor moles at the strike force as it sailed over Rafe Fleuri's front line. One third of the force disappeared before it reached its objective. The survivors settled into the area that had topped Rafe's list of possible targets. The seed moles started generating disassemblers, ground molders, and the other units that made up a properly designed molecular army.

The vulnerable point in Wen Kang's plan was the fundamental fact that underpinned every activity in the solar system. Nothing could proceed without energy.

Without a steady flow of energy, a molecular force was an inert mass of complex arrangements of atoms. The seed moles couldn't make new moles, the disassemblers couldn't chew up their adversaries, and the magnetic projectors couldn't launch their dust-speck missiles.

The moles in both armies received a fraction of their energy from the sunlight that fell on their part of the lunar surface. The bulk of their energy came from solar energy collectors and hydrogen-fusion reactors located in their home craters. Specialized transmission moles laid lines that connected the army to its energy sources.

The units in Wen's strike force had been isolated from their energy sources. Everything depended on the next step in the plan. The strike force had to establish a link with the forces it had left behind.

Rafe's simulations indicated there was a 40 percent probability he could block the linkup. He had shown his conclusions to his grandmother and she had looked them over and concluded that Wen Kang was making a political maneuver.

"He's deliberately taking a risk," Emma Fleuri said. "His simulations obviously told him the same thing. He didn't launch this attack just to gain a little ground. He did it for political reasons—so he can overshadow his military experts and get control of the war. Hit him with everything you need to wipe that force out. Don't hesitate to pull resources away from the rest of the battlefield. Humiliate him."

Rafe would never have initiated such a strategy on his own. If he weakened the rest of his forces, the enemy might see an opportunity and attack somewhere else. But that was only his opinion. His grandmother had spoken.

Rafe knew that he must never let Emma think he might be developing attitudes that could generate a conflict. His grandmother's personality had been shaped by one of mankind's more durable cultural patterns. Her society had been founded by gangsters who had been pushed out of Marseilles by their rivals. They had emigrated to the new society developing on the

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Moon and seized a controlling position in the industrial complex that had been growing in Copernicus crater. Eventually, they had shifted their attention to the possibilities inherent in genetic modification. Copernicus had become a leading exporter of assassins, bodyguards, service employees, and male and female concubines. Through it all, Emma Fleuri's ancestors had retained the political traditions they had acquired when they had been extorting money from vending-machine owners back on Earth. At the core of Emma's personality, there was a law which took precedence over every other sentiment and value that might be important to her: *you must dominate or be dominated.*

Rafe selected twelve areas in the zone he occupied and reduced their energy budgets by 90 percent. The area around the enemy incursion received huge flows of energy. The Copernican seed moles in the area produced new weapons at five times their normal rate. Rafe's reserve force landed on top of the enemy's link-up line and hit it with a fury that exceeded anything Wen Kang had anticipated when he had set up his pre-attack simulations. Three hours after the counterattack, Wen's strike force was hopelessly cut off. Its units faded out, one by one, as they exhausted their internal energy supplies.

Rafe lost all sense of proportion when he was maneuvering his forces through his neural/electronic interfaces. He still smiled, now and then, when he took a break and remembered again that his formidable weapons were so small they looked like creatures the average human could destroy with a few well-aimed stamps. Any human who actually stepped onto the battlefield would have been very foolhardy, of course. A small patch of disassemblers could uncouple the molecular bonds in a spacesuit boot in a few seconds. Full-scale armored vehicles would last a little longer, but most of them would be brought to a halt a few meters after they entered a mole field.

Rafe would have been happier maneuvering larger units, but moles were actually more powerful. The political realities had been an important consideration, too. Three international observation satellites orbited the Moon. A highly visible, macroscale assault would have provoked a full-scale international intervention, led by missiles equipped with the latest developments in arms technology. A slow creep across empty surface was another matter. Wen Kang's predecessors had lodged complaints with the Secretariat, but the international politicians in Singapore had refused to admit that they were faced with a crisis.

The Copernicans had developed connections with international corporations and other centers of power. The international politicians would start considering intervention when the Convivial Republic was faced with an obvious, undeniable threat to its existence. By then, Rafe Fleuri would be poised to destroy it. His homicidal grandmother would be dangerously disappointed if he weren't.

For Wen Kang, it was the bitterest moment of his life. The Director of External Security showed him no mercy when she appeared on his communications screen half an hour after Rafe Fleuri launched his attack on the strike force.

"All our calculations indicate that he must have drawn huge flows of energy from other parts of the battlefield," the Director said. "If we weren't hampered by this ludicrous voting scheme of yours, we could launch an at-

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tack of our own somewhere else. Instead, we're paralyzed by the fact that we won't have a vote count for another four hours. Don't you think it's time you came to your senses?"

Wen drew himself up. He regarded the image on the screen with all the self-confidence a celebrity showers on those who labor in obscurity. His voice dropped to a murmur. "I realized that we could miss opportunities when I established the War Poll. I would rather lose an opportunity than continue with a strategy that can only lead to destruction."

His shoulders slumped as soon as the Director left the screen. The discussion screens had turned into a carnival of ridicule as soon as the public had realized that the Type 32 strike force had had been destroyed. Normally, Wen spent an hour a day in the cafés, refreshing himself with the bustling public social life that had become one of Eratosthenes' biggest charms. Today, for the first time in his life, he had discovered that he couldn't face all that uninhibited informality.

Wen had been dealing with bouts of depression ever since he had been a teenager. He could have eliminated the problem with a routine personality modification, but he had been advised that the modification would generate unpredictable changes in other aspects of his personality. He had opted to live with the condition. He had learned to cope with it. But how did you deal with it when it was a realistic response to real events? This time, it wasn't a mere biochemical malfunction. The strike force plan had been the primary reason he had fought to become First Administrator. Rafe Fleuri had brushed it aside in three hours—as if it was a minor obstacle.

Wen knew that his euphoric bounce-backs could be just as dangerous as the emotional plunges that preceded them. He had nearly lost his life on a record-breaking long distance lunar trek when he had succumbed to last minute exultation and overestimated his stamina. This time, he slipped into emotional weightlessness six hours after he touched bottom. It happened so fast that he started floating before he realized that he was shooting back up.

He paced back and forth in front of his console as he rattled dictation at the microphones. He would go to the assembly. He would admit that they had suffered a disaster. He would even admit that he had personally supported the strike force and thought it was a good idea. He would take the offensive. He would tell them that the War Poll was their only hope. He would offer them Lan Chih's ideas as an example. He would praise Lan Chih's work to the stars. The opposition would complain about the hardships that the long-suffering public would have to endure if the Republic diverted resources to the kind of effort Lan Chih was proposing. He would stand in front of them—the elected leader of one of the most renowned cities of the age—and remind them of all the qualities their city represented . . . of all the civilized virtues and lively pleasures that had made it a byword on every world the human species inhabited. . . .

His hand reached for a bottle in the rear left corner of his refreshment cabinet. He poured a ruby liquid to the second line on a slender, cone-shaped glass and downed it in a gulp. His pacing gradually slowed down. He settled in front of his screens and took another look at Lan Chih's arguments for a massive defensive buildup. A criticism from the Thirteen Pedagogues caught his interest and he activated a link that connected him to a detailed exposition of their reasoning. A link at the end of that section led to a discussion of the more practical alternative proposals. Eventually, he found

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himself reading the Pedagogues' latest comments on Nanette Aart's ideas.

The ruby liquid had done its job. He felt alert and confident, but he wasn't living in a fantasy world. He could look at the words and numbers on his screen and examine them with a detached, pleasantly cool rationality.

He had been right when he had decided that Nanette's proposals were too complex. She had received the same criticism from Lan Chih and the Thirteen Pedagogues, and she had apparently been taking it into account. Her proposals had become easier to follow. They even looked as if they could be workable. Lately, she had been receiving 20 percent of the vote—a 60 percent increase over the percentages she had been recording the last time he had looked at her screens.

Her big problem was her presentations. She still cluttered up her screens with too much detail. If you worked your way through all the branching trees and if-then statements, you could see that she was suggesting courses of action that were superior to anything anyone else was offering. But how many people were willing to do that much work?

The statements from the Thirteen Pedagogues were supposed to summarize and clarify her ideas, but it was obvious they weren't politicians either. Teachers worked with captive audiences. Their pupils paid attention to their materials because they wanted a diploma or some other useful reward. Politicians and journalists had to cajole people who could exercise their basic human right to ignore anything that didn't interest them.

Wen jabbed his left hand at one of his screens and brought up an animation program. Three hours after he had settled behind his console, he placed a call to Nanette Aart.

The presentation he had put together combined animation with a simple script he had written for her. It was eight minutes long, and he had substituted a cartoon figure in the places where she would appear on the screen when he released it to the public.

"You've left out half the argument!" Nanette said. "You've left out some of the most crucial parts!"

"People can still look at your original work. And the Pedagogues'. This is just to get them interested—just to show them that it's worth looking at the other stuff."

"Aren't you afraid some of them will just cast their votes on the basis of one look at this? I can see how some people will find it very persuasive."

Wen had been dealing with intellectually enhanced children for almost four decades. Nanette was twice as intelligent as Rafe Fleuri, according to her records, but she was still only nine years old—a pudgy, straight-haired little girl who had started fidgeting as soon as she had realized the man on her screen really was the First Administrator.

"You always have people who look for an easy way to fulfill their responsibilities," Wen said. "It's just one of the things you have to deal with in politics. You've obviously got some very interesting ideas here. Ideas that people should be considering. You just need to catch their interest."

"We can win. I *know* we can win! Rafe Fleuri is a half-brain. We can twist him up with maneuvers he won't even begin to understand. He's so dumb he probably won't even know he's been defeated until we've destroyed half his forces."

Wen contacted two of his personal assistants, showed them what he'd done, and asked them to work with Nanette full-time. Then he went before the Assembly and called for the all-out defensive effort that Lan Chih had

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outlined in his proposals. Fifteen percent of the electricity produced in the city would be diverted to military production. Citizens at all levels of wealth would be issued ration quotas based on their average consumption of electricity during the last six months.

The motion passed on a straight party vote, with two members of his coalition defecting to the opposition. Energy started flowing along new channels minutes after the count appeared on the ceremonial tally screen.

Lan Chih had already created a set of defensive maneuvers that exploited the new forces taking their place on the battlefield. Wen threw his bloc behind Lan Chih's proposals, and the results started appearing on his map-screen. The Copernican advance slowed. Rafe Fleuri's damage-to-gain ratio started changing.

Even the Director of External Security admitted that Lan Chih was producing proposals that were better than most of the recommendations she and her staff were turning out. Some of Lan Chih's best offerings were actually mini counter-attacks. Any attack had to involve periods when the attacking forces were exposed to a riposte. Lan Chih had a talent for spotting those periods and launching a short-range raid.

The voting procedure should have hampered a counter-attack strategy. The counter-attack couldn't be launched, after all, until the voting deadline had ended. Instead, Lan Chih seemed to read the flow of Rafe Fleuri's movements and predict the times when they would be vulnerable.

"He's obviously got a flair for defensive maneuvering," the Director of External Security said. "If he keeps this up, we may as well sit back and let him do the work."

Wen shook his head. "Keep offering proposals. There's a difference between your kind of trained expertise and his kind of brilliance. We need to have your proposals in reserve, as an alternate."

Lan Chih was receiving 33 percent of the vote, plus a 10 percent boost from Wen's bloc. Nanette's vote had been steadily rising as people started paying attention to the summaries Wen's assistants were preparing for her. One of the assistants was a highly experienced public communications specialist—a woman whom Wen had been working with since his third year in the Assembly. The other was a young man with an intelligence enhancement that was almost as good as Nanette's. The young man was supposed to act as an intellectual go-between: he would explain Nanette's ideas to the communications specialist and quiz Nanette when he didn't completely understand something. Wen wasn't surprised to learn that the young man was becoming an enthusiastic supporter.

"He's absolutely convinced that she can win this for us," the communications specialist reported with a smile. "I think I'm beginning to understand the Joan of Arc legend."

Wen watched Nanette's numbers grow. The young man and the communications specialist were the only people who knew he was giving her help. On the discussion screens, Nanette's supporters were beginning to sound belligerent. Some of them were claiming the voting system was rigged in favor of Lan Chih.

Does anyone really believe a government can conduct this kind of poll without cheating. . . ? Isn't it time someone in the Assembly investigated our glorious First Administrator. . . ? How can you expect politicians to investigate each other when they're all following a script they worked on together?

Wen had always been amused by people who thought that the world was

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governed by secret manipulators. Now that he *was* a secret manipulator, he still smiled when he read comments like that. The paranoids might not believe it, but he and the Principal Speaker genuinely disliked each other. When they cooperated on something, they did it primarily because they knew the voters would have them both disassembled if they didn't.

The paranoids always thought you could run a government as if you were pressing buttons on a machine. He was spending a third of his time just keeping his bloc together. He called dozens of people every day. He looked for ways he could do people favors. He studied personality models of key individuals. Half the people in his bloc would still be voting for the Director of External Security's proposals if they had been left to themselves. Twenty-five percent had indicated they wanted to vote for Nanette's ideas.

Wen had planned to wait until Nanette's vote reached 35 percent without any help from him. When it reached 34 percent, one of his informants advised him the Principal Speaker was about to throw his personal influence behind Nanette's work. Wen gave the necessary orders, and Nanette won the next vote by two percentage points.

Nanette solved the secrecy problem by proposing three different attacks every time she put a new proposal on the screens. If her proposal won the vote, one of the attacks would be chosen at random just before launch time. She claimed she could do all the planning in three hours.

"I've got a planning and evaluating ensemble I developed myself," she told her young admirer. "I combined a business program, FactorMaster 7, with Dome2—which is a lot better than the so-called upgrades, believe me—and added a switch that lets me insert myself in the ensemble as a de-facto supplementary program. There are lots of times when the ensemble works so automatically I can spend a whole hour working on things like interaction equations without paying any conscious attention to it. Believe me, the interaction equations for a simple little twelve-organism environment are a lot more complicated than anything any so-called military genius ever worried about!"

Her successes were her strongest advertisement. Four days after Wen had thrown his support behind her, the voters began to notice their forces had actually retaken several hundred square meters of lunar surface. By the eighth day, her schemes were receiving over 60 percent of every poll.

In his speech to the Assembly, Wen cited Sun Tzu and Niccolò Machiavelli. He had never *read* either, but his search programs always threw up passages from both authors when he composed statements about the art of war.

"We are witnessing, once again, the inherent strength of a truly democratic society—the strength that Niccolò Machiavelli praised in one of his wisest chapters. In the great struggle against Carthage, Machiavelli observed, the ancient Romans won the ultimate victory because they could turn to Fabius when they needed a leader who would proceed with caution, and to Scipio when the times changed and they needed a general who could take the offensive. A democracy will always outlast a tyranny, Machiavelli contended, because a democracy can employ the full diversity of its citizens' talents and temperaments."

Lan Chih stopped offering proposals two days later. Wen made a personal realtime call and Lan Chih listened to his appeals with his arms folded over his chest.

"You've found your vision of hope," Lan Chih said. "I've done my share."

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"We need alternate proposals, Honored Lan. We need the benefit of your insight. Nanette is very young. Her proposals are complex and hard to follow. We could all benefit from the knowledge they've been criticized by someone who can understand their weaknesses."

"So the voters can feel more secure in spite of their ignorance? So you can be assured you're manipulating things in the right direction?"

Wen let his head slump forward in a hint of a bow. He knew he would be making a dangerous mistake if he denied he had been influencing the vote. "They're voting for her now because her ideas are succeeding. But what will we do if they start to fail? I have to think about that possibility, too."

"I was giving you the kind of proposals you needed—proposals that could stave off defeat almost indefinitely. You decided you needed something more aggressive. Perhaps you were right. As you say, First Administrator—she's winning the polls because her proposals are succeeding."

Over the next four days, Wen made two hundred calls to personal supporters. The rest of his schedule included five banquets, three sporting events, six breakfasts, and four lunches. By his standards, the period rated slightly above average on the busyness index. He had been maintaining a similar agenda, almost without letup, for over two decades.

Rafe Fleuri had talked to exactly one person during that time. His grandmother could read maps and calculate square kilometers, too.

"I realize this girl has an intellectual advantage," Emma Fleuri said. "But she is coping with some handicaps, too. She hasn't been given the opportunity to devote years of study to strategic problems. She can only transmit changes in her orders once every twelve hours. If I were in your position, grandchild, I would look for ways I could exploit that twelve-hour gap."

Rafe listened in silence. He had already taken the twelve-hour gap into account. The alternative scenarios streaming through his brain dampened the anxiety evoked by his grandmother's admonitions.

The scenario he pulled out of the stream was a masterpiece of subtlety. Dozens of small, innocent-looking movements completely altered the field position. He transmitted the attack order six hours after his adversaries had conducted their latest poll—a time when they were fully committed to the plan they had voted for. Nanette Aart's carefully scheduled maneuvers had been disrupted half an hour after his counter-attack began. The Convivial Republic's moles were forced to switch to preprogrammed self-defense modes. Rafe noted a weak area in their center and increased the flow of energy and reserve units at two critical points.

The enemy units were reduced to fighting as individuals and small groups. Individual units could put up strong preprogrammed defenses, but Rafe could launch coordinated attacks. He could concentrate his forces in selected areas and destroy the enemy piecemeal. The forces grouped in front of him began to look thin and vulnerable. He turned his attention to scenarios that could end with the enemy army split in half.

"She's completely confused," Nanette's devotee said. "The whole thing was a complete surprise. She doesn't know what to do."

"She can't think of anything at all? We can't just let our moles go on fighting individual defensive actions."

"She's afraid anything she suggests will set off a catastrophe. I think she's paralyzed. Everything's been going so well. . . ."

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This time, Wen reached for an orange liquid when he opened his refreshment cabinet. This time, he knew he couldn't let himself waste hours sitting around brooding.

"I'm certain she'll get herself under control sooner or later," the young man said. "If you could just set up the kind of defense you put up the last time Rafe Fleuri launched a big offensive. And give her time."

The Director of External Security had refused to post a defensive plan on the discussion screens. She had demanded that Wen give her and her staff direct tactical control of the situation. "You've had your chance to experiment," the Director said. "It's time we returned to reality, First Administrator."

"And what will you do if I let you resume direct control? Can you stop this offensive before he makes a breakthrough?"

"At this point, no one can guarantee anything. At this point, I would say he's speeded up his timetable by four months even if we manage to prevent a total rout."

"And that's the best you can offer us?"

"It's better than the situation your young genius has handed you!"

In the end, the Director had yielded to his stubbornness and agreed to continue working with the War Poll procedures. She was an honorable professional officer. She couldn't abandon her responsibilities—even if she thought that she was working with a lunatic.

On the map, Rafe Fleuri's forces were cutting a big arc in the center of the Convivial Republic's forces. In another twelve hours, at their present rate, they would slice all the way through.

Wen placed a call to Lan Chih, and the Voice of Lan Chih's apartment gave him the same answer he had already heard five times. "I'm sorry, but he is not at home right now, First Administrator."

"And I presume he still isn't accepting messages from me?"

"He has advised me to tell you that he does not wish to be disturbed."

"The Republic is in mortal danger! We are facing a critical defeat!"

"He has advised me to tell you he does not wish to be disturbed."

Wen had created three personas he could use when he wanted to agitate for his views on the discussion screens. He put all three to work discussing Lan Chih's absence. One of them argued that only Lan Chih could produce a successful defense proposal. The other two mocked the idea that one man could be so important.

Lan Chih has retired from the screens because he knows that he has nothing to offer, Wen wrote under his "Dan Four" persona. *Nanette is still our only hope. She has been caught by surprise. She is young. Brilliant young people frequently have trouble accepting setbacks. Have confidence. She will recover. Her superior talents will shine again.*

The people of Eratosthenes City were noted for their outspoken intellectual individualism. Eighteen parties had met the standards specified in the election code and placed at least two representatives in the Legislative Assembly. Interview a citizen of Eratosthenes, one media commentator had observed, and you will find you're talking to someone who believes he's an expert on any subject humans can discuss.

That wasn't quite true. Scientists and technologists dominated the population of Eratosthenes. Most of its members had a healthy respect for true expertise. But an equally healthy number would have told you that politics and military strategy should be placed in the same container as theology

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and moral philosophy. They were all areas in which the so-called experts had proved they didn't know any more than anyone else.

Wen's three-sided commentary started attracting responses as soon as he placed it on the screens. Wen had studied Lan Chih's electronic communications and the kind of reactions they provoked. Lan Chih's reserved, pedantic style seemed to attract critics who were addicted to the more rough-hewn forms of electronic debate. Lan Chih never addressed the ruffians directly, but his responses to other people indicated he had read their jibes.

Wen followed the debate while he worked on the backlog of routine traffic that flowed across a First Administrator's screens. On his map screen, Rafe Fleuri's disassemblers chewed their way through the Republic's forces. Whenever the debate seemed to slow, Wen threw in another missive from one of his personas. Every message provoked another frenzy of responses.

Lan Chih returned to the screens five hours after his detractors had transmitted their first jibes. His messages were addressed to people who supported him—a sober, rather colorless lot—but they all contained answers to the stings that had made him smart. He was particularly outraged by the onslaughts that implied he couldn't produce a counter to Rafe Fleuri's offensive.

A child could have stopped him hours ago, Lan Chih wrote. *Maybe not the child you've been following, of course. It would take a child with a reasonable ability to ask a computer program the right questions.*

And he proved he could do what he said by publishing a multi-branch proposal which could bring the Copernican attack to a halt no matter what Rafe Fleuri did.

We are not dealing with the highest level of human intellect, Lan Chih pointed out. *We are merely maneuvering against the best mind the genetic designers could develop when they were forced to start with Emma Fleuri's descendants.*

Wen called one of his oldest intimates and started babbling at her as soon as she appeared on the communications screens. "I couldn't believe it," he said. "I was just trying to get him to start talking. I thought we'd have to engage in a mass begging campaign. Instead, he hands us everything I wanted. Just like that!"

Malita Divora had been sharing Wen's confidences for over thirty years. They had moved in and out of a sexual relationship they both found comfortable. They had both weakened their sex drives to a gentle glow, so they could devote their energies to other areas. Wen treasured all the hours he had spent sitting in front of his communication screen while Malita sat across the room from him and concentrated on her own activities. Now she kept her comments to a minimum.

"You're not happy with the way I'm doing this, are you?" Wen said.

"I want us to win."

"But you're not happy with the way I'm going about it."

"I don't want to see this place become the property of a bunch of thugs. It's the only place in the solar system I want to live right now. It may be the only place I'll *ever* want to live."

Malita shrugged. "You're the politician, Wen. I honestly don't care how you do it. I just want you to *do* it."

For Rafe Fleuri, the big arc in the center of the battlefield had become an

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augur of imminent total victory. He had already created plans in which he took advantage of the options he would open up when he broke through his enemy's line. Should he concentrate on the destruction of the two halves? Should he launch an aggressive thrust down the center and try to gobble up all the territory he could overrun? There had been a moment when he had actually believed he could do both.

Now he could see his advance faltering. The resistance in front of the arc was stiffening into a solid wall. Half a dozen counter-attacks were hitting him at his most exposed points. The complexities of the super-intelligent girl child had been replaced by the barriers and counter-attacks created by the defensive-minded old man.

Rafe tightened his grip on the arms of his lounge chair. The neural/electronic interface produced another river of options. Action orders flowed out of his brain. The forces along the arc reduced their efforts. They would maintain a light, steady pressure while he built up his resources behind the lines. Then he would strike with a force that would make the old man reel.

On the discussion screens, Nanette's supporters were once again decrying the futility of defensive action. Her young apostle claimed she had recovered from her panic. She could see attackable weaknesses in every sector of the map.

"We've lured him into a static mode," her admirer said. "He's building up his forces, but he isn't really maneuvering them yet. She wants to launch a dozen simultaneous attacks. Then she'll spread out from her lodgments. And disrupt his energy flow and communications lines."

"And what happens when the young genius on the other side counter-attacks?" the Director of External Security asked.

"Nanette claims she understands him now. She isn't going to make the mistakes she made last time."

"I'm certain she won't," the Director said. "It's the mistakes she's going to make *this* time I'm worried about!"

Wen agreed with the Director. "Nanette has come up with counters to every reasonable possibility," Wen told Malita Divora. "But that doesn't mean she's thought up every response Rafe can make. What's she going to do when she's faced with a response she hasn't thought about?"

"So why don't you just stick with Lan Chih?"

"Lan Chih doesn't understand the long-term political situation. He's a brilliant military tactician, but he can't see beyond his mapscreen. Emma Fleuri is totally committed to conquest. It's built into her personal culture. Right now, the Copernicans are only using 12 percent of their energy flow—an energy flow that's 40 percent bigger than ours. We're using 15 percent and we're straining ourselves politically when we do that. What are we going to do if she realizes they can't break Lan Chih's defensive maneuvers with their present commitment? And goes to 20 percent? Or 30 percent? We have to keep them under constant, unrelenting pressure."

"You can't keep them under pressure if Nanette's attack fails, Wen."

"No, but we can let Nanette go as far as she can. And turn the situation over to Lan Chih when her attack runs down. In a way, we've almost got an ideal situation. We've got Nanette to launch attacks that will keep Rafe working full-time, and we can turn to Lan Chih when her attacks start faltering and have him guide us through a defensive period. We wouldn't even know either of them existed if I hadn't instituted the War Poll."

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Malita stared at him. "You think Lan Chih will come to the rescue for a *second* time if Nanette gets into trouble?"

"He's done it once, hasn't he?"

"Lan Chi is a self-centered, sensitive, exceptionally vain human being. Everything he's done or said has made that clear."

"He's also a patriot," Wen said. "You underestimate him."

"You say things like that with such a straight face, Wen! I suppose that we can also assume the voters will alternate between Nanette and Lan Chih exactly as the situation requires?"

"They have so far."

Rafe learned Nanette had won the vote seconds after the War Poll announced the results. He had been assuming Nanette had been permanently discredited, but he wasn't unprepared. He had created contingency plans and he managed to order the plans into operation a full minute before the attack hit him. He had been maneuvering into position for his own counter-attack and now he had to redirect almost every unit in his army. The girl child's attack resembled a rash that broke out in fifty different sites. Energy flows had to be rerouted. New communication lines had to be established. Every site she attacked seemed to have more tactical importance than he had realized.

He could feel the weight of her superior intelligence pressing on his confidence. She was getting better. She had obviously learned from her last fiasco. There was only one way he could handle the situation. He would have to set up a strong defensive position on the left and put it on semi-automatic. Then he would concentrate his attention on the right. He would pit all of his intellect against half of hers.

Wen had arranged things so Nanette's proposals had only won by 3 percent. Lan Chih's supporters had lost the vote, but they had kept the discussion screens busy with their arguments. This time, Wen had even sent half-a-dozen orators into the cafés and had them propagandize for Lan Chih's side. Banners with Lan Chih's image had appeared in the corridors as soon as Wen realized Nanette's attack was winding down. Half the cafés now maintained wallscreens that followed the war situation minute-by-minute.

"So she's failed you again," Lan Chih said. "When are you and your push-button voters going to learn?"

Wen bowed his head and politely ignored Lan Chih's assumption that Nanette's attack had failed. On his mapscreen, the Copernican forces were regaining some of the positions they had lost when Nanette had gone on the offensive. Her attack had been stopped cold, but it had regained 40 percent of the territory the Copernicans had overrun during their last advance.

"Our decision to switch to the offensive was obviously ill-advised," Wen said.

"It will *always* be ill-advised! How many times do I have to tell you? Wear them down. It's your only hope."

"It's a difficult path to follow, Honored Lan. The hunger for victory distracts us with too many temptations."

"And now you'd like me to save you once again."

"In four hours, there will be another vote. If you were to give us a good defensive option—the people of this city know their salvation depends on you. The cheers you'll hear in the cafés will be even louder than the cheers you heard the last time you saved us from defeat."

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Lan Chih snorted. "You want to go on the defensive all over the map? I can tell you right now, First Administrator—any plan I offer you will include counter-attacks on Rafe Fleuri's left. He's concentrated his forces on his right and left himself wide open on the other side."

And he did it, of course, because Nanette attacked him. But we won't disrupt your equanimity by pointing that out.

"Any plan you offer us will undoubtedly be effective, Honored Lan. Your record of success speaks for itself. I can assure you—when it comes time to allocate praise for our efforts in this struggle, no name will shine more brightly than yours."

Rafe was once again staring at a map on which the image of victory was slowly fading away. He had gained some ground overall. He was making a two-steps-forward, one-step-backward kind of progress. But that wasn't the vision he had seen in his head. He had been staring at an opportunity for overwhelming, crushing triumph. And now he was racing to defend himself against the counter-attacks hammering on his own weakened left.

And what would he do if they let Nanette unleash another attack as soon as the old man established a defensive position? How long had it been since he had turned his mind away from this relentless torrent of map screens, alternate plans, and alternates to the alternates to the alternates?

A triple ping sounded in his ear. The spy probes he had planted in the corridors relayed an image of his grandmother advancing toward the operations room with twelve guards at her back. A small round-faced girl was holding Emma Fleuri's hand.

Rafe closed his eyes. He heard his voice mutter a three-syllable code word. His war program switched to an automatic defensive mode. A new program started flowing through his interface—a program he had been preparing since the day his grandmother led him to this room and told him he was replacing the older cousin who had been conducting operations since the war started. Guard units received orders that carried all the codes and verifications Emma Fleuri attached to the orders she transmitted. Forty armed men started running down the corridors. Doors closed along selected passages, sealing off the reinforcements his grandmother would call for when she realized what was happening.

"We have to act fast," the Director of External Security said. "The average length of internal struggles in Copernicus is fourteen hours."

"I'm suspending the War Poll temporarily," Wen said. "I'm placing you and your staff in charge of operations. I'm certain most of the sensible people in the Assembly will understand."

The Director smiled. "Now that the enemy is disorganized and distracted by internal conflicts, even we ordinary, uninspired military bureaucrats can handle the situation?"

"We need to hit them *now*," Wen said. "With everything we've got. That's the important consideration. Get your staff moving."

They terminated the conversation and Wen started moving around the room, picturing the things he would tell the Assembly. It wouldn't be quite as easy as he'd made it sound, of course. The wits in the opposition would mock him because he had dropped the War Poll at the moment of victory. The Senior Analyst would insist he had to be consistent to the very end.

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It didn't matter. The Assembly would support him. They would be looking at a mapscreen on which the Director and her staff were demolishing the entire Copernican force.

"We're going to re-take every square kilometer the Copernicans have won in the last five years," Wen told Malita Divora. "Then we'll set up our own border. And the Assembly will give me the resources to set up a permanent border force—a force so strong it may be years—it may be *decades*—before the Copernicans even *dream* of conquest."

"At this moment," Malita said, "I can almost believe you can do anything."

"*We* can do it, Malita. We're *going to do it!*"

"I don't have the slightest doubt, Wen. But in the meantime—are you sure this is a good time to let yourself become so exuberant?"

"I'll pull myself down in a few minutes. This is a big moment. Let me enjoy it. I've got a right to enjoy myself now and then."

"I was just giving you a little friendly advice."

"I understand. I appreciate it. I'll be all right."

She switched off and he turned away from the screen and resumed his march around the room. Words churned and bubbled in his brain. He planted himself on his plushest rug and threw his hand at an imaginary Assembly. He heaped mountains of praise on Lan Chih—the Savior who had unhesitatingly come to the rescue of the Republic on two separate, desperate occasions. He carted out the figure of the young Warrior Queen and elevated her on a pedestal of oratory. He applauded—above all—the good sense of the good citizens who had, in every vote, opted for the type of leadership the Republic needed at that particular moment. He was creating the greatest speech of his life—a speech that would ring down the ages like a trumpet of victory.

He hurried to his cabinet and poured himself a maximum dose of the ruby liquid. He turned from corner to corner, toasting an imaginary crowd.

"Let us celebrate as no people have ever celebrated! Let the whole solar system hear us cheering! Our republic has prevailed! *Democracy has triumphed!*"

He raised the glass above his head and savored one final moment of euphoria before he let the chemical do its work.

"I have *made* it triumph!" ❍

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NO MORE PRISONS:
A Memoir of the New Millennium

When all the prisoners were released–
    Millions upon millions–oh!
What celebrations there were then,
    But also what terrible revenges.
Despite the precautions of educators,
    Who did all they could,
Despite the neighborhood patrols
    And special broadcasts of *Fidelio*.
Analysis of their questionnaires
    Revealed a deep unhappiness,
A sense of loss and trust betrayed,
    For freedom is no guarantee
Of being fed and housed and allowed
    To bully losers lower
In the pecking order, which are
    The perks of life in prison–
Not to mention the simplifying absence
    Of women (or men), the family
Having been reduced to an infinity
    Of bunk beds in which all men
Are brothers. No such sweet coercions
    For the free, who are doomed
To re-enact, like Thornton Wilder's
    Emily, the sit-coms of their youth,
Mom in her apron, Pop with his pipe,
    Happily ever after
And every dinner a Death Row Special
    Of whatever you've asked for.

–Tom Disch

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PATENT INFRINGEMENT

Nancy Kress

Nancy Kress frequently writes about genetic engineering. Her most recent book, however, *Probability Sun,* is the second in an aliens-and-space-war trilogy focusing on physics, not biotech. The third book, *Probability Space,* is due out this summer.

Press Release

Kegelman-Ballston Corporation is proud to announce the first public release of its new drug, Halitex, which cures Ulbarton's Flu completely after one ten-pill course of treatment. Ulbarton's Flu, as the public knows all too well, now afflicts upwards of thirty million Americans, with the number growing daily as the highly contagious flu spreads. Halitex "flu-proofs" the body by inserting genes tailored to confer immunity to this persistent and debilitating scourge, whose symptoms include coughing, muscle aches, and fatigue. Because the virus remains in the body even after symptoms disappear, Ulbarton's Flu can recur in a given patient at any time. Halitex renders each recurrence ineffectual by "flu-proofing" the body.

The General Accounting Office estimates that Ulbarton's Flu, the virus of which was first identified by Dr. Timothy Ulbarton, has cost four billion dollars already this calendar year in medical costs and lost work time. Halitex, two years in development by Kegelman-Ballston, is expected to be in high demand throughout the nation.

New York Post

KC ZAPS ULBARTON'S FLU

NEW DRUG DOES U'S FLU 4 U

Jonathan Meese
538 Pleasant Lane
Aspen Hill, MD 20906

Dear Mr. Kegelman and Mr. Ballston,

I read in the newspaper that your company, Kegelman-Ballston, has re-

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cently released a drug, Halitex, that provides immunity against Ulbarton's Flu by gene therapy. I believe that the genes used in developing this drug are mine. Two years ago, on May 5, I visited my GP to explain that I had been exposed to Ulbarton's Flu a lot (the entire accounting department of The Pet Supply Catalogue Store, where I work, developed the flu. Also my wife, three children, and mother-in-law. Plus, I believe my dog had it, although the vet disputes this). However, despite all this exposure, I did not develop Ulbarton's.

My GP directed me to your research facility along I-270, saying he "thought he heard they were trying to develop a med." I went there, and samples of my blood and bodily tissues were taken. The researcher said I would hear from you if the samples were ever used for anything, but I never did. Will you please check your records to verify my participation in this new medicine, and tell me what share of the profits are due me.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Jon Meese
Jonathan J. Meese

From the Desk of Robert Ballston
Kegelman-Ballston Corporation

To: Martin Blake, Legal
Re: attached letter

Marty—

Is he a nut? Is this a problem?

Bob

Internal Memo

To: Robert Ballston
From: Martin Blake
Re: gene-line claimant Jonathan J. Meese

Bob—

I checked with Records in Research and yes, unfortunately this guy donated the tissue samples from which the gene line was developed that led to Halitex. Even more unfortunately, Meese's visit occurred just before we instituted the comprehensive waiver for all donors. However, I don't think Meese has any legal ground here. Court precedents have upheld corporate right to

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patent genes used in drug development. Also, the guy doesn't sound very sophisticated (his *dog?*). He doesn't even know Kegelman's been dead for ten years. Apparently Meese has not yet employed a lawyer. I can make a small nuisance settlement if you like, but I'd rather avoid setting a corporate precedent for these people. I'd rather send him a stiff letter that will scare the bejesus out of the greedy little twerp.

Please advise.

Marty

From the Desk of Robert Ballston
Kegelman-Ballston Corporation

To: Martin Blake, Legal
Re: J. Meese

Do it.

Bob

Martin Blake, Attorney at Law
Chief Legal Counsel, Kegelman-Ballston Corporation

Dear Mr. Meese:

Your letter regarding the patented Kegelman-Ballston drug Halitex has been referred to me. Please be advised that you have no legal rights in Halitex; see attached list of case precedents. If you persist in any such claims, Kegelman-Ballston will consider it harassment and take appropriate steps, including possible prosecution.

Sincerely,
Martin Blake
Martin Blake

Jonathan Meese
538 Pleasant Lane
Aspen Hill, MD 20906

Dear Mr. Blake,

But they're my genes!!! This can't be right. I'm consulting a lawyer, and you can expect to hear from her shortly.

Jon Meese
Jonathan Meese

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Catherine Owen, Attorney at Law

Dear Mr. Blake,

I now represent Jonathan J. Meese in his concern that Kegelman-Ballston has developed a pharmaceutical, Halitex, based on gene-therapy that uses Mr. Meese's genes as its basis. We feel it only reasonable that this drug, which will potentially earn Kegelman-Ballston millions if not billions of dollars, acknowledge financially Mr. Meese's considerable contribution. We are therefore willing to consider a settlement and are available to discuss this with you at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Catherine Owen

Catherine Owen, Attorney

From the Desk of Robert Ballston
Kegelman-Ballston Corporation

To: Martin Blake, Legal
Re: J. Meese

Marty—

Damn it, if there's one thing that really chews my balls it's this sort of undercover sabotage by the second-rate. I played golf with Sam Fortescue on Saturday, and he opened my eyes (you remember Sam; he's at the agency we're using to benchmark our competition). Sam speculates that this Meese bastard is really being used by Irwin-Lacey to set us up. You know that bastard Carl Irwin has had his own Ulbarton's drug in development, and he's sore as hell because we beat him to market. Ten to one he's paying off this Meese patsy.

We can't allow it. Don't settle. Let him sue.

Bob

Internal Memo

To: Robert Ballston
From: Martin Blake
Re: gene-line claimant Jonathan J. Meese

Bob—

I've got a better idea. *We* sue *him,* on the grounds he's walking around with our patented genetic immunity to Ulbarton's. No one except consumers of Halitex have this immunity, so Meese must have acquired it illegally, possi-

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bly on the black market. We gain several advantages with this suit: We eliminate Meese's complaint, we send a clear message to other rivals who may be attempting patent infringement, and we gain a publicity circus to both publicize Halitex (not that it needs it) and, more important, make the public aware of the dangers of black market substitutes for Halitex, such as Meese obtained.

Incidentally, I checked again with Records over at Research. They have no documentation on any visit from a Jonathan J. Meese on any date whatsoever.

Marty

From the Desk of Robert Ballston
Kegelman-Ballston Corporation

To: Martin Blake, Legal
Re: J. Meese

Marty—

Brilliant! Do it. Can we get a sympathetic judge? One who understands business? Maybe O'Connor can help.

Bob

The New York Times

HALITEX BLACK MARKET CASE TO BEGIN TODAY

This morning the circuit court of Manhattan County is scheduled to begin hearing the case of *Kegelman-Ballston v. Meese.* This case, heavily publicized during recent months, is expected to set important precedents in the controversial areas of gene patents and patent infringement of biological properties. Protesters from the group FOR US: CANCEL KIDNAPPED-GENE PATENTS, which is often referred to by its initials, have been in place on the court steps since last night. The case is being heard by Judge Latham P. Farmingham III, a Republican who is widely perceived as sympathetic to the concerns of big business.

This case began when Jonathan J. Meese, an accountant with The Pet Supply Catalogue Store. . . .

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Catherine Owen, Attorney at Law

Dear Mr. Blake,

Just a reminder that Jon Meese and I are still open to a settlement.

Sincerely,

Catherine Owen

Martin Blake, Attorney at Law
Chief Legal Counsel, Kegelman-Ballston Corporation

Martin Blake, Attorney at Law
Chief Legal Counsel, Kegelman-Ballston Corporation

Cathy—

Don't they teach you at that law school you went to (I never can remember the name) that you don't settle when you're sure to win?

You're a nice girl; better luck next time.

Martin Blake

The New York Times

MEESE CONVICTED

PLAINTIFF GUILTY OF "HARBORING" DISEASE-FIGHTING GENES WITHOUT COMPENSATING DEVELOPER KEGELMAN-BALLSTON

From the Desk of Robert Ballston
Kegelman-Ballston Corporation

To: Martin Blake, Legal
Re: Kegelman-Ballston v Meese

Marty—

I always said you were a genius! My God, the free publicity we got out of this thing, not to mention the future edge. . . . How about a victory celebration this weekend? Are you and Elaine free to fly to Aruba on the Lear, Friday night?

Bob

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The New York Times

BLUE GENES FOR DRUG THIEF

JONATHAN J. MEESE SENTENCED TO SIX MONTHS FOR PATENT INFRINGEMENT

From the Desk of Robert Ballston
Kegelman-Ballston Corporation

To: Martin Blake, Legal
Re: Halitex

Marty! I just had a brilliant idea I want to run by you. We got Meese, but now that he's at Ossining the publicity has died down. Well, my daughter read this squib the other day in some science magazine, how the Ulbarton's virus has in it some of the genes that Research combined with Meese's to create Halitex. I didn't understand all the egghead science, but apparently Halitex used some of the flu genes to build its immune properties. And we own the patent on Halitex. As I see it, that means that Dr. Ulbarton was working with **OUR** genes when he identified Ulbarton's flu and published his work. Now, if we could go after *Ulbarton* in court, the publicity would be tremendous, as well as strengthening our proprietorship position. . . . O

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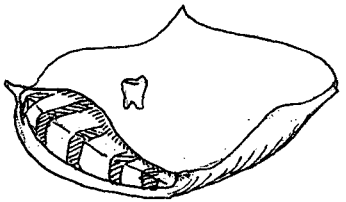
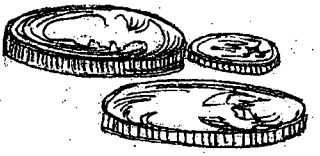
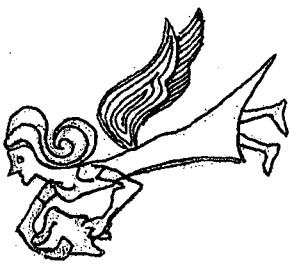
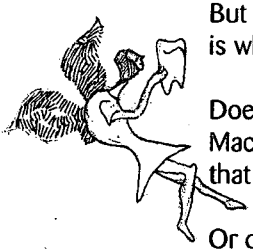




WONDERING WHAT THEY ARE UP TO IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT



I guess I can accept the idea
that a fairy takes your baby teeth
and leaves you some coins
as fair trade.



But what I want to know
is what does she do with those teeth?

Does she make jewelry from them?
Macabre earrings, say, or lumpy necklaces
that she then sells at Saturday Market?

Or does she crush them
into a fine calcium powder
to help push away
the pixie version of osteoporosis?

Or maybe she fashions tiny dice
from all those canines and bicuspids
to use on casino night at the enchanted meadow.

This whole disturbing business
of trafficking in body parts,
well, it just troubles me a little,
thinking how the young
are made unwitting partners
to strange practices
they are not equipped to understand.

—Mario Milosevic

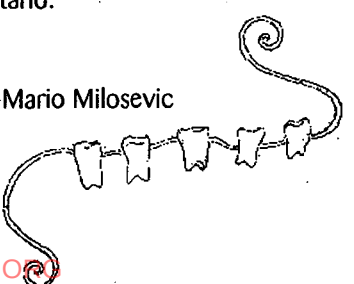


Illustration by June Levine

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The author tells us that "the idea for 'Madonna' came from a billboard, but incubated quietly until writer Lucius Shepard recommended a book on Juarez. A finished draft was sent through the gauntlet of the Sycamore Hill Writers Workshop, where I only bled a little." Mr. Frost's next novel is the dark fantasy *Fitcher's Brides*. It's due out later this year from Tor Books.

MADONNA OF THE MAQUILADORA

Gregory Frost

Illustration by Mark Evans

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You first hear of Gabriel Perea and the Virgin while covering the latest fire at the Chevron refinery in El Paso. The blaze is under control, the water cannon hoses still shooting white arches into the scorched sky.

You've collected some decent shots, but you would still like to capture something unique even though you know most of it won't get used. The *Herald* needs only one all-inclusive shot of this fire, and you got that hours ago. The rest is out of love. You like to think there's a piece of W. Eugene Smith in you, an aperture in your soul always seeking the perfect image.

The two firemen leaning against one of the trucks is a good natural composition. Their plastic clothes are grease-smeared; their faces, with the hoods off, are pristine. Both men are Hispanic, but the soot all around them makes them seem pallid and angelic and strange. And both of them are smoking. It's really too good to ignore. You set up the shot without them knowing, without seeming to pay them much attention, and that's when you catch the snippet of their conversation.

"I'm telling you, *cholo,* the Virgin told Perea this explosion would happen. Mrs. Delgado knew all about it."

"She tells him everything. She's telling us all. The time is coming, I think."

Click. "What time is that?" you ask, capping the camera.

The two men stare at you a moment. You spoke in Spanish—part of the reason the paper hired you. Just by your inflection, though, they know you're not a native. You may understand all right, but you are an outsider.

The closest fireman smiles. His teeth are perfect, whiter than the white bar of the Chevron insignia beside him. Mexicans have good tooth genes, you think. His smile is his answer: He's not going to say more.

"All right, then. Who's Gabriel Perea?"

"Oh, he's a prophet. *The* prophet, man."

"A seer."

"He knows things. The Virgin tells him."

"The Virgin Mary?" Your disbelief is all too plain.

The first fireman nods and flicks away his cigarette butt, the gesture transforming into a cross—"Bless me, father. . . ."

"Does he work for Chevron?"

The firemen look at each other and laugh. "You kidding, man? They'd never hire him, even if he made it across the Rio Bravo with a green card between his teeth."

Rio Bravo is what they call the Rio Grande. You turn and look, out past the refinery towers, past the scrub and sand and the Whataburger stand, out across the river banks to the brown speckled bluffs, the shapes that glitter and ripple like a mirage in the distance.

Juarez.

"He's over there?"

"Un esclavo de la maquiladora."

A factory slave. Already you're imagining the photo essay. "The Man Who Speaks to the Virgin," imagining it in *The Smithsonian, The National Geographic.* An essay on Juarez, hell on earth, and smack in the middle of hell, the Virgin Mary and her disciple. It assembles as if it's been waiting for you to find it.

"How about," you say, "I buy you guys a few beers when you're finished and you tell me more about him."

The second guy stands up, grinning. "Hey, we're finished now, amigo."

"Yeah, that fire's drowning. Nothing gonna blow today. The Virgin said so."

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You follow them, then, with a sky black and roiling on all sides like a Biblical plague settling in for a prolonged stay.

You don't believe in her. You haven't since long ago, decades, childhood. Lapsed Catholics adopt the faith of opposition. The Church lied to you all the time you were growing up. Manipulated your fears and guilts. You don't plan to forgive them for this. The ones who stay believers are the ones who didn't ask questions, who accepted the rules, the restrictions, on faith. Faith, you contend, is all about not asking the most important questions. Most people don't think; most people follow in their hymnals. It takes no more than a fingernail to scrape the gilt from the statues and see the rot below. The Virgin Mary didn't exist for hundreds of years after the death of Jesus. She was fashioned by an edict, by a not very bright emperor. She had a cult following and they gained influence and the ear of Constantine. It was all politics. *Quid pro quo*. Bullshit. This is not what you tell the firemen, but it does make the Virgin the perfect queen for Juarez: that place is all politics and bullshit, too. Reality wrapped in a shroud of the fantastic and the grotesque. Just like the Church itself.

You went across the first time two years ago, right after arriving. The managing editor, a burly, bearded radical in a sportcoat and tie named Joe Baum, took you in. He knew how you felt about the power of photography, and after all you're the deputy art director. One afternoon he just walked over to your desk and said, "Come on, we're gonna take the afternoon, go visit some people you need to see." You didn't understand until later that he was talking about the ones on film. Most of them were dead.

Baum covered El Paso cultural events, which meant he mingled with managers and owners of the *maquiladoras*. "We'll have to get you into the loop. Always need pictures of the overlords in their tuxes to biff up the society pages." He didn't like them too much.

In his green Ford you crossed over on the Puente Libre, all concrete and barbed wire. He talked the whole time he drove. "What you're gonna see here is Bush and Clinton's New World Order, and don't kid yourself that it isn't. Probably you won't want to see it. Hell, I don't want to see it, and America doesn't want to see it with a *vengeance*."

He took you to the apartment of a man named Jaime Pollamano. Baum calls him the Chicken Man. Mustache, dark hair, tattoos. A face like a young Charles Bronson. Chicken Man is a street photographer. "We buy some of his photos, and we buy some from the others, too." There were six or seven others in the little apartment that day, one of them, unexpectedly, a woman. The windows were covered, and an old sheet had been stuck up on the wall. They'd been expecting you. Baum had arranged in advance for your edification. "What you're gonna see today," he promised, "is the photos we *don't* buy."

Then the slide show began. Pictures splashed across the sheet on the wall.

First there were the female corpses, all in various states of decay and decomposition. Most were nude, but they weren't really bodies as much as sculptures now in leather and bone. The photographers had made them strange and haunting and terrifying, all at the same time. In the projector light you can see their eyes—squinting, hard, glancing down, here and there a look of pride, something almost feral. The woman is different. She stares straight at death. But not you. After awhile, you're watching the photographers' faces in order not to have to look at what they've captured.

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The show went on for an hour. Like a tour of a huge art museum, long before it was over you'd reached maximum capacity. You were full, and the rest of their images just washed over you, unable to penetrate.

Afterward Baum introduced you to them but the room stayed dark. You walked through the line, shaking hands, nodding, dazed. One man was drunk. Another, the feral one, had the jittery sheen of an addict. The woman hung back from all of you.

Baum bought some of the pictures in spite of what he'd said, paying too much for them. Maybe he collected them, a kind of pornography—they sure weren't going to get into the paper. He walked you out, across the street, past his car and through the Plaza de Armas, the main square. It was a Friday night and there must have been a thousand people milling about. The ghosts of the photos tagged along, bleeding into the world. The cathedral across the plaza was lit in neon reds, greens, and golds, looking more like a casino than a church. Everywhere, people were selling something. Most of it was trash collected and reassembled into trinkets, earrings, belts, whatever their skill allowed. There were clowns on stilts wandering around. A man selling containers of flavored ice chips. Baum bought two. Others sold tortillas, drugs, themselves. All of it smelled desperate. A lot of the crowd, Baum told you as you drove home after, were actually Americans. "They come across the border on Friday nights for a little action. The factory girls sell themselves for whatever extra dollars they can get from the party boys. Sometimes that's more than they've made all week at their 'honest' jobs."

You remember at some point in the drive asking him why the ill-paid workers don't unionize, provoking Baum's derisive laughter. "No union organizer would have a job by day's end, is why. Some of them wouldn't make it home alive, either, although you can't tie anything to the corporations that fire them. Just as likely they'd piss off their co-workers by threatening the status quo, and some other low-wage *esclavo* would kill 'em. It's happened before—whole shifts have been fired, everyone blamed for the actions of one or two. It's a great testament to American greed, your maquiladora."

That conversation comes back to you now, driving away from your drinks with the firemen. "Your maquiladora"—as if he was handing it over to you. Gabriel Perea in Baum's terms is a dangerous man to himself and anyone who knows him. The Virgin has turned him, some would say saved him. Protecting him for something important. The firemen anticipate something between Armageddon and Rapture. Transcendence. All you know is that you want to get there before the Kingdom of Heaven opens for business or some co-worker splits his skull with a wrench.

"*Pura guasa,*" Baum says when you tell him what you want to do. "Just a lot of superstitious chatter. I've heard about this guy before. He's like an urban legend over there. They need for him to exist, just like *her*."

Nevertheless, you say, it's a great story—the kind of thing that could garner attention. Awards. The human spirit finding the means to survive in the maquiladora even if that means is a fantasy. Baum concedes reluctantly that it could be a good piece.

"*If* there's anything to it."

There's only one way to find that out. In *c. de Juarez,* all roads lead to the Chicken Man.

* * *

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On the outside of his apartment someone has sprayed the words "Dios Está Aquí." Chicken Man has moved three times since you first met him. Most of the street photographers move routinely, just to stay alive, to stay ahead of the *narcotraficante,* or the cops or anyone else they've pissed off with their pictures. Of the six you met that first day, only five are still living. Now Pollamano's holed up just off the Pasea Triunfa de la Republica. And holed up is the right term. The cinder block building has chicken wire over the windows and black plastic trash bags on the inside of them. You knock once and slide your business card under the door.

After awhile the door opens slightly and you go in. It's hot inside, and the air smells like chemicals, like fixer and developer. The only light on is a single red bulb. Chicken Man wears a Los Lobos tank top, shorts and sandals. He's been breathing this air forever. He should have mutated by now. "*¿Quiubo,* Deputy?" *Deputy* is the street photographers' name for you. Titles are better than names here anyway. They call Joe Baum "La Bamba."

He invites you to sit. You tell him what the firemen told you. What you want to do with it.

"*El Hombre de la Madona*. I know the stories. A lot of 'em circulating round."

"So, what's the truth? He isn't real? Doesn't see her?"

"Oh, he's real. And he maybe sees her." He crosses to the shelves made of cinder blocks and boards, rummages around in one of thirty or so cardboard boxes, returns with a 4x5 print. In the red light, it's difficult to see. Chicken Man turns on a maglight and hands it to you.

You're looking at a man in dark coveralls. He's standing at a crazy, Elvis Presley kind of angle, feet splayed and legs twisted. His hands are up in front of him, the fingers curled. There are big protective goggles over his eyes. He has a long square jaw and a mustache. Behind him other figures in goggles and coveralls stand, out of focus. They're co-workers and this is inside a factory someplace. Fluorescent lights overhead are just greenish smears. The expression on his face is fierce—wide-eyed, damn near cross-eyed.

"He was seein' her right then," says the Chicken Man.

"You took this?"

"Me? I don't set foot in the *maquilas.* Factory owners don't like us, don't want us taking pictures in there. Some of the young ones get in for a day, shoot and get out. I'm too old to try that kind of crap."

"Who, then?"

"*Doncella loca.*"

He holds out his hand, takes the photo back. When he hands it back, there's writing on it in grease pencil. A name, Margarita Espinada, and the words "*Colonia Universidad.*" He describes how to drive there. "You met her," he says, "the very first time La Bamba brought you over. She lives in her car mostly. *Auto loco*. I let her use my chemicals for her pictures when she needs to. And the sink. She's shooting the Tarahumara kids now. Indians. They don't trust nobody, but they trust her. Same with the maquilas. Most of the workers are women. Teenagers. She gets in where I can't. She's kinda like you, Deputy. Only smart." He grins.

You grin back and hand him a twenty and three rolls of film. He slides the money into his pocket but kisses the plastic canisters. "Gracias, amigo."

Colonia Universidad is easy to find because half of it has just burned to

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the ground and the remains are still smoking. Blackened oil drums, charcoal that had defined shacks the day before, naked bed springs and a few bicycle frames twisted into Salvador Dali forms. Margarita Espinada is easy to find, too. She wears a camera around her neck, and black jeans, boots, and a blue work shirt. The jeans are dirty, the shirt stained dark under the arms and down the back. Her black hair is short. The other women around her are wearing dresses and have long hair, and scarves on their heads. At a quick glance you might mistake her for a man.

They're all watching you before the car even stops. When you stride toward them, the women all back up, spread apart, move away. Margarita stands her ground. She raises her camera and takes your picture, as though in an act of defiance. From a distance she looks to be about twenty, but up close you can see the lines around the eyes and mouth. More like early thirties. Lean. There's a thin scar across the bridge of her nose and one cheek.

If she remembers you from the Chicken Man's, there's no sign of it in her eyes. She turns, points. You follow, leaning around the nearest shack to see.

There's a man dangling from some power lines down the hill, turning slowly like a charred piñata. "He was tryin' to run a line from that transformer to his house. He wasn't very good at it."

You look away, and in the silence hand her the photo. She looks at it, at her name on the back, then wipes it down her thigh, wipes her name away. "You want a drink, Deputy?" There's the tiniest suggestion of amusement in the question.

"I'm not really a deputy, you know. It's just a nickname."

"Hey, at least they don't call you *pendejo*."

"I don't know that they don't."

She laughs, and for a moment that resolute, defiant face becomes just beautiful.

The shack she takes you to is barely outside the fire line. The frame is held together by nails driven through bottle caps. The walls are cut up shipping cartons for Three Musketeers candy bars. No floor, only dirt. There's an old, rust-stained mattress and a couple of beat-up suitcases. She comes up with a bottle of tequila from God knows where, apologizes for the lack of ice and glasses. Then she takes a long swig from the mouth of the bottle. Her eyes are watering as she passes it to you. You smell her then, the odor of a woman mixed in with the smoke smell, sweat and flesh and dirt. You almost want to ask her why she does this, lives this way, but you haven't any right. Instead you say his name as a question.

She lays down the photo. "Gabriel Perea is real, he exists. He's what they call an assembler, on a production line. The *maquila* is about twenty miles from here. The story of him grows as it travels. All around."

You recite the firemen's version: great prophet, seer who will lead them into the kingdom of Heaven.

"*Pura guāsa,*" is her answer. Pure foolishness—exactly what Baum said.

"But the picture. He *is* seeing the Virgin?"

She shrugs. "Yes, I know. From your eyes—how could I take the picture and not say it's true?" She pushes her thumb against the image, covering the face. "This says it's *real*. Not true. I know that he tells everyone what the Virgin wants them to know."

"And what's that?"

"To be patient. To wait. To endure their hardships. To remember that they will all find Grace in Heaven more beautiful than anything they can imagine."

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"That wouldn't take much of a heaven. Has anyone else seen her?"

"No one in the factory now."

"But someone else?"

Again, she shrugs. "Maybe. There are stories. Someone saw her in a bathroom. In a mirror. There are always stories once it starts. People who don't want to be left out, who need to hear from her. That can be a lot of people.

"In *Colonia El Mirador,* a Sacred Heart shrine begins to bleed. It's a cheap little cardboard picture, and they say it bleeds, so I go and take its picture."

"Does it? Does it bleed?"

"I look in the picture I take, at how this piece of cardboard is nailed up, and I think, ah, the nailhead has rusted and the rust has run down the picture. That's all. But I don't say so."

"So you lied to them, the people who made the claims about it?"

She snatches back the bottle. Her nostrils are flared in defiance, anger; but she laughs at your judgment, dismissing it. "I take the picture and it says what is what. If you don't see, then what good is there in telling you *how* to see?"

The anger, contained, burns off her like radiation. You flip open your Minox and take her picture. She stares at you in the aftermath of the flash, as if in disbelief.

Breaking the tension, you ask, "Is he crazy?"

She squats down in the dirt, her back pressed against the far wall, takes off the camera and sets it on the mattress. "Listen, I got a job in a factory because I heard there was a dangerous man there. A Zapatista brother, someone of the Reality. He had workers stirred up.

"And I thought, I want to be there when they have him killed. I want to document it. The bosses there will pay workers to turn in their co-workers. Pay them more money than they can earn in a month, so it's for sure someone will turn him in. But this Perea, he sought out those people and he convinced them not to do this. He offered hope. 'The Dream we can all dream, so that when we awaken it will remain with us.' That's what he promised. When I learned that, then I knew I had to photograph him. And his murder."

"Except the Virgin showed up."

She grins. "I hadn't even gotten my first exciting twenty dollar paycheck. The rumor circulated that he was going to confront the managers. Everyone was breathing this air of excitement. And I have my camera, I'm ready. Only all of a sudden, right on the factory floor, Gabriel Perea has a vision. He points and he cries, 'Oh, Mother of God! See her? Can you see her? Can you hear her, good people?' Of course we can't. No one can. They try, they look all around, but you know they don't see. He has to tell it. She says, 'Wait.' She says, 'There will be a sign.' She'll come again and talk to us."

"Did she? Did she come back?"

"About once every week. She came in and spoke to him when he was working. People started crowding around him, waiting for the moment. It's always when he doesn't expect. Pretty soon there are people clustering outside the factory and following Gabriel Perea home. The managers in their glass booths just watch and watch."

"They didn't try to stop it?"

"No. And no one got into trouble for leaving their position, or for trespassing. Trying to see him. To hear his message. And I begin to think, these men are at least afraid of God. There is something greater and more powerful than these Norteamericanos."

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"Yet you don't believe it?"

In answer, she gets up and takes the larger suitcase and throws it open on the mattress. Inside are photos, some in sleeves, some loose, some in folders. You see a color shot of a mural of a Mayan head surrounded by temples, photos of women like those you scared off outside, one of a man lying peacefully sleeping on a mattress in a shack like this one. She glances at it and says, "He's dead. His heater malfunctioned and carbon monoxide killed him. Or maybe he did it on purpose."

She pulls out a manila folder and opens it. There's a picture of an assembly line—a dozen women in hairnets and surgical gowns and rubber gloves, seated along an assembly line.

"What's this place make?"

"Motion controller systems." You stare at a photo sticking out from the pack, of Gabriel Perea head-on, preaching, in that twisted martial arts pose of his. This time she has crouched behind equipment to get the shot, but in the background you can see the managers all gathered. Most of them are grainy shadows, but the three faces that are visible are clearly not frightened of what's happening here.

"They look almost bored."

She nods.

"You think he's a fake. Comes in posing as an agitator, a Zapatista, to catch workers who'd be inclined to organize, and then catches them in a big net supplied by the Virgin Mary, who promises them a wonderful afterlife provided they grind themselves down like good little girls and boys in this one."

She glances at you oddly, then says, "Maybe they *don't* call you names, Deputy."

You meet her eyes, smile, thinking that you'd be willing to fall in love with this other photographer; but the idea fades almost as fast as it arrives. She lives with nothing and takes all the risks while you have everything and take no risks at all. Her dreams are all of her people and death. Yours are of awards and recognition.

She offers you the bottle again and you drink and wheeze and wonder why it is you can't have both dreams. Why yours seems petty and cheap. You don't believe in the Virgin, either. The two of you should be able to support each other. Ignoring the delusions of a few people over their rusting shrine is a far cry from ignoring this kind of scam.

She agrees to get you an interview with Gabriel Perea. It will take some days. He is a very reluctant holy man, more shy than the Tarahumara.

"Come back in three days." To this *colonia,* to this shack, to wait for her. All right, you think, that's good. It gives you time to get information.

You give her five film canisters and she kisses you on the cheek for it. You can feel her lips all the way home.

When you tell Baum what you've found, he sends you down to see Andy Jardin. Andy's a walking encyclopedia of corporate factology—if it's listed on the DJI, Nasdaq or the S&P 500, he's got a profile in his computer if not in his head.

He barely acknowledges you when you show up. The two of you had one conversation on the day you were hired—Baum introduced you. Andy said, "Hey." You take pictures, he babbles in stocks—two languages that don't recognize each other without a translator. He has carrot-colored hair that

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might have been in dreadlocks the last time it was mowed, and wears black plastic frame glasses through which he peers myopically at his computer screen.

You clear your throat, ask him if he knows of the company. Immediately you get his undivided attention. He reels off everything—no one has ever accused this kid of trying to hold back.

They manufacture control systems, have government contracts, probably fall into someone's black budget, like most of the military manufacturers. Their stock is hot, a good investment, sound and steady. They don't actually manufacture anything in the maquiladora, which is a common story. They just assemble parts, which are shipped up to Iowa, where the company's based. That's where the controllers are made. He says they're developing what are called genetic algorithms. When you look blank, he happily sketches in the details: genetic algorithms are the basis for lots of artificial intelligence research. Of course, he adds, there is no such thing currently as AI—not in the evil, computer-mind-bent-on-world-domination sense. It's all about learning circuits, routines that adjust when conditions change, that can refine themselves based on past experience. Not brains, not thinking—more a kind of mathematical awareness.

Before you leave, he invites you to buy some of their stock. "This is a really good time for them," he says.

Later on, Baum tells you that Andy's never invested a cent in his life, he just loves to watch, the ultimate investment voyeur. "And you can expect to get every article that even mentions your company from now on. He'll probably forward you their S&P daily, too.

"You're into something here?" he asks, as if that's the last thing that concerned him. The real question he's asking is "How long is this going to take?"

All you can do is shrug and say, "I really don't know. This woman—this photographer—she has a notion he's a ringer, someone the company threw in to manipulate the workers, keep them docile. I want to interview him, take his picture, get inside the factory and get some pictures there, too. You know, get what I can before they know that I'm looking at him specifically."

"Is it a Catholic thing—I mean, your interest?"

"It's not about me."

Whether or not he believes you, he doesn't say.

As you're leaving he adds, "You've seen enough to know that weird and bizarre are the norms over there, right?" Again, he's not saying it outright. Beneath his camaraderie lies the real edginess: He's worried about you and this story—how you fit together.

"I won't forget. Hecho in Mexico is Hecho in Hell."

Baum laughs. It's his saying, after all.

Perea speaks so quietly and so fast that you can't catch half of it. He sits in the corner away from the lantern, on the ground. He bows his head when he speaks as if he's ashamed to admit what's happening to him. This is not, to your thinking, the behavior of a man who is playing a role. Still, how could anyone be certain? You take pictures of him bathed in lantern light, looking like a medieval pilgrim who has made his journey, found his God.

Margarita kneels beside you, leaning forward to hear clearly, translating his murmured Spanish. "'I don't know why the Virgin picked me. I'm just a *Chamula*.' That's an Indian from Chiapas, Deputy," she explains. 'I believe

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that things need to change. People need their dignity as much as their income. I thought I could do this on my own—change things in this factory, I mean. The other workers would trust me and together we would break the cycle in which the neoliberals keep us.'"

"What does she look like?"

"'She has blue robes, a cloth over her head. I can sort of see through her, too. And her voice, it fills my head like a bell ringing. But it's soft, like she's whispering to me. No one else sees her. No one else hears her.'" He looks up at you, his eyes pleading for understanding. "'She stopped me from doing a terrible thing. If we had protested as I planned, many people would have been killed. They would bring in the federales and the federales would beat us. There would be people waiting for us when we got home—people the federales won't see. Some of us would have been tortured and killed. It might have been me. But I was willing to take that risk, to make this change.'"

"She stopped you?"

He nods. "'On my very first day, someone said that the factory is built on a sacred place. In the San Cristóbals we have these places. Maybe she heard our fear. There is a shrine nearby where a picture of Jesus weeps. And another with tears of blood.'" Margarita glances sharply at you as she repeats this. You nod.

"'She tells us to live. To endure what life gives us, no matter how hard. She knew what was in my heart. She said that the greatest dignity could be found in the grace of God. To us finally the kingdom will be opened for all we suffer. It will be closed to those who oppress us.'" He is seeing her again as he speaks, his eyes looking at a memory instead of at you.

Afterward, you ride in your car alone—Margarita insists on driving her own, an old Chevy Impala that rumbles without a muffler. She won't ride with anyone; it's one of those things about her that makes it clear she's crazy. Your tape recorder plays, Margarita's translation fills the night.

Perea's telling the truth so far as he knows it. In a moment of extreme danger, the Virgin appeared. That's happened before—in fact, she usually manifests where the climate's explosive, people are strained, fragmented, minds desperate for escape. It's religion to some, mental meltdown to you. So why do you resist even that explanation now? "A Catholic thing?" Baum asked. That's not it, though. You recollect something you once heard Carl Sagan say in an interview: Extraordinary events require extraordinary proof. "So, Carl," you ask the dark interior, "how do you pull proof out of a funhouse mirror?"

As if in reply, your headlights capture for a moment the image on the wall of a brick ruin—a big plastic Daffy Duck mask with a human forearm dangling from its mouth.

By the time Margarita returns, you know what you're going to do. You tell her to see what she thinks. She sits back on the mattress. You can hear her pulling off her boots. "You might get away with it," she answers, and there's anger in her voice. "If they don't pay too much attention to your very Castilian Español. You still talk like a *gringo*. And you still think like one, too. You listen to what we say, and you see it all in black and white, Norteamericano versus us. La Bamba's the same way—he thinks in old ways. You guys see what most of your people won't, but you see it with old eyes."

"How are we—I don't understand. The Zapatistas you mean? What—?"

She makes a noise to dismiss you, and there's the sound of the bottle be-

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ing opened. Not sharing. Then suddenly she's talking, close enough now that you can almost feel the heat of her breath.

"It's not north against south anymore, rich whites against poor Mexicans. That's only a thing, a speck. It's the whole world, Deputy. The maquiladora is the whole world now. Japan is here, Korea is here, anyone who wants to make things without being watched, without having to answer to anyone, without having to pay fairly. They're here and everywhere else, too. *Ya, basta!* You understand? Enough! It's not about NAFTA, about whose treaty promises what. Whoever's treaty, it will be just the same. Here right now in Mexico the drug dealers are investing. They buy factories, take their money and grind their own people to make more money, *clean* money. This is clean, what they're doing. And it's no different here than anywhere else, it's even *better* here than some places. It's a new century and the countries they bleed together, and the only borders, the only fences, are made of bodies. All the pictures you've seen, but if you don't see this thing in all of them, then you're seeing nothing!"

Clearly it's time to leave. "I'm sorry," is all you can think to say, and you turn to go. And suddenly she's blocking your way. Her hands close on your arms. For all your fantasies you didn't see this coming. Here in a shack with a cardboard door is not where you'd have chosen. Only this isn't your choice, it's entirely hers. Anybody could come by, but no one does. She works your clothes off, at the same time tugging at her own in hasty, angry, near-violent action. Sex out of anger. You keep thinking, she's as crazy as they said she was, she's furious with you for your stupidity, how can she possibly want to fuck you, too? For all of which, you don't fight, of course you don't, it's your fantasy however unexpected and inexplicable

You fall asleep with your arms around her, her breasts warm against you, almost unsure that any of it happened.

The Virgin only visits Perea in the factory, and that's where you get a job. Driving a forklift. It's something you used to do, so at least you don't look like an idiot even if they're suspicious of your accent. If they are, they say nothing. They're hiring—from what Baum said, they're always hiring.

You get assigned a small locker. In it are your work things—coveralls and safety glasses. There are signs up in every room in bright red Spanish: "Protective Gear Must Be Worn At All Times!" and "Wear Your Goggles. Protect Your Eyes." Your guide points to one of these and says, "Don't think they're kidding. They'll fire you on the spot if they catch you not wearing the correct apparel."

The lift is articulated. It can take you almost to the ceiling with a full pallet. It has control buttons for your left hand like those found on computer game devices. Working it is actually a pleasure at first.

The day is long and dull. Breaks are almost non-existent. One in the morning, one in the afternoon, both about as long as it takes to smoke a cigarette. The other workers ask where you're from, how you got here. Margarita helped you work out a semi-plausible story about being fired from dock work in Veracruz when you got caught drunk. At least you've been to Veracruz. A few people laugh at the story and commiserate. Drunk, yeah. Nobody pries—there's hardly time for questions, even over lunch, which is the only place you get to take off the safety glasses and relax—but you see suspicion in a few eyes. You can tell any story you want, but you can't hide the way you tell it. Your *voice* isn't from Veracruz. Nevertheless, no one chal-

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lenges you. Maybe they think you're a company ringer, a spy. That would give them good reason to steer clear of you. Whatever you are, they don't want trouble—that's what Baum said. This job is all they've got. And at week's end, just like them, you'll collect your $22.50, too.

At day's end, you get on a hot bus and ride to the same drop-off point where they picked you up at five A.M., and then walk nearly an hour back to the shack in *Universidad*. Most of the others on the road are women, walking in clusters. They shy away at your approach. You pass by a group of kids, none of them more than ten years old. One, who looks about six, holds a Coca-Cola can. The straw's stuck in one nostril, and you can tell by the slack, dopey look on his face that whatever's in that can isn't a soft drink.

The second day you're there, the Virgin appears to Gabriel Perea.

You're unloading a shipment of circuit boards and components off the back of a semi, when suddenly you find yourself all alone. It's too strange. You climb down and wander out of the loading bay and into the warehouse itself. Everyone's gathered there. A circle of hundreds. Right in the middle Perea stands at that crazy angle like a man with displaced hips. His hands are out, palms wide, and he's repeating her words for everyone: "She loves us all. We are all her children. We are all of us saved and our children are saved. Our blood is *His* blood!" The atmosphere practically crackles. Every eye is riveted to him. You move around the outside perimeter, looking for the masters. There are two up on a catwalk. One looks at you as if you're a bigger spectacle than Perea. You turn away quickly and stare like the others are doing, trying to make like you were looking for a better view of the event. From somewhere in the crowd comes the clicking of a shutter. Someone is taking shots. You could take out your tiny Minox now and shoot a couple yourself, but there's nothing to see that Margarita didn't capture already. Nothing worth drawing any more attention to yourself. *Nada que ver,* the words echo in your head.

For a long time you stare at him. "The *niño* loves us all. His is the pure love of a child. Care for Him, for it's all He asks of you." People murmur, "Amen," and "Yes." They cross themselves.

Eventually you chance another look at the two on the catwalk. One of them seems to be talking, but not to the other. You think: *He's either schizophrenic or he's got a microphone.*

In a matter of minutes the spectacle is over. She had nothing remarkable to say; she was just dropping in to remind everyone of her love for them and theirs for her. Now she won't come again for days, another week.

Except for the first two nights you eat alone in the shack. Margarita is somewhere else, living out of her car, photographing things, capturing moments. How does she do this? How does she live forever on the edge, capturing death, surrounded, drenched in it? How can anybody live this way? It's hopeless. The end of the world.

You lie alone in the shack, as cold at night as you are scalding in the afternoon when you walk down the dirt path from the bus drop. You'd like to fall into a swimming pool and just float. The closest you can come is communal rain barrels outside—which were once chemical barrels and God knows whether there's benzene or something worse floating in them, death in the water. Little kids are splashing it over themselves, drinking from it. Watching makes you yearn for a cold drink but you wouldn't dare. Margari-

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ta's friends in the *colonia* cook you dinner on their makeshift stoves, for which you gladly pay. By week's end, they've made more from the dinners than you'll take home from the factory.

Friday you drive home for the weekend, exhausted.

You flop down on your bed, so tired that your eyes ache. All you can think about is Margarita. Gabriel Perea's Virgin has melted into a mad photographer who is using you for sex. That's how it feels, that's how it is, too. A part of her clings to you, drowns with you in that dark and dirty shack, at the same time as she dismisses your simplistic comprehension of the complexities of life where she lives. A week now and you've begun maybe to understand it better—at least, you've begun taking pictures around the *colonia*—it's as though she's given you permission to participate. It would be hard not to find strange images: the dead ground outside a shack where someone has stuck one little, pathetic plant in a coffee can; another plywood shack with a sign dangling beside the door proclaiming "Siempre Coke!" The factory, too. A couple of rolls of film so far, as surreptitiously as possible. The machinery is too interesting not to photograph, even though you feel somehow complicitous in making it seem beautiful and exotic. Even in ugliness and cruelty, there is beauty. Even in the words of an apparition there are lies and deceit. You finally drift off on the thought that the reason you despise the Virgin is that she sells accommodation. It's always been her message and it's the message of the elite, the rich, a recommendation that no one who actually endures the misery would make.

The phone wakes you at noon. Baum has an invitation to a reception for a Republican Senator on the stump. "All our best people will be there. I could use a good photographer and you can use the contacts."

"Sure," you say.

"You'll need a tux."

"Got one."

"You'll need a shower, too."

How he figured that out over the phone, you can't imagine; but he's right, you do smell bad, and it's only been a week. When you get up, your whole body seems to be knitted of broken joints. It's a test of will to stand up to the spray. Being pummeled by water feels like the Rapture, pleasure meeting pain.

It's an outdoor patio party with three Weber Platinum grills big enough to feed the Dallas Cowboys, half a dozen chefs and one waiter for every three people. Everybody wants to have their picture taken with the Senator, who is wearing tan makeup to cover the fact that he looks like he's been stumping for two weeks without sleep, much less sunlight, and you're glad it's not your job to make him look good.

As it is, you end up taking dozens of pictures anyway. Baum calls most of the shots, who he wants with the Senator, whose faces will grace the paper in the morning. He introduces you to too many people for you to keep track of them—all the corporate executives and spouses have turned out for this gala event. When he introduces you to the head of the Texas Republican Party, just the way he says it makes it sound as if you are beholding a specifically Texan variety of Republican. For a week you've been living in a shack with dirt floors among people who cook their food on stoves made from bricks and flat hunks of iron, and here you are in a bow tie and cummerbund, hobnobbing with the richest stratum of society in El Paso and

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munching on shrimp bigger than your thumb, a spread that would feed an entire *colonia* for days. It's not just the disparity, it's the displacement, the fragmentation of reality into razor-edged jigsaw puzzle pieces.

And then Baum hauls you before a thin, balding man wearing glasses too small for his face, the kind that have no frames, just pins to hold the earpieces on. "This is Stuart Coopersmith." He beams at you—a knowing smile if ever there was one. To Coopersmith, he says, "He's the guy I told you about who's into image manipulation." He withdraws before he has to explain anything to either of you.

"So, you're Joe's new photo essayist," he says.

A smile to hide your panic. "I like that title better than the one they gave me at the paper. Mind if I use it?"

"Be my guest." If he recognizes you, he shows no indication.

"So, what do you do that I should consider taking *your* picture, Mr. Coopersmith?"

He touches his tie as he names his company. It seems to be a habit. "Across the river?"

"La *maquiladora*. You guys make what—"

"Control devices. We're all about control." There's a nice, harmless word for someone flying under the public radar.

"It's more than that, though, right? Someone told me, your devices actually learn."

"Pattern recognition is not quite learning, not like most people think of it. Something occurs, our circuit notices and predicts the likelihood of it recurring, and then if it does as predicted, the circuit loops, and the more often the event occurs when it's supposed to, the more certain the circuit becomes, the more reliable the information and, ah, the more it seems like there's an intelligence at work. What we know to be feedback *looks* like behavior, which is where people start saying that the things are alive and thinking."

"I'm not sure I—"

"Well, it's no matter, is it? You can still take pictures without understanding something this complex." Coopersmith says this so offhandedly, you can't be certain whether you've been put down. He flutters his hand through the air as if brushing the subject away. "We just manufacture parts down here. We do employ lots of people—we're very popular in the *maquiladora*. Like to help out the folks over there."

You nod. "So, what's on deck now?"

He looks at his champagne glass, then glances sidelong, like Cassius conspiring to kill Caesar. "Oh, some work for NASA. For a Mars flight they're talking about. Using GAs to predict stress, breakdown—things they can't afford in the middle of the solar system. The software will actually measure the individual's stress from moment to moment, and weigh in with a protective environment if that stress jumps at all. It's still pattern recognition, you know, but not the same as on an assembly line. I suppose it's really very exciting."

"Amazing." It's probably even important work.

"In fact you all should do a story on it—I mean, not right this second, but in a few months, maybe, when the program's a little further along and NASA's happy, you and Joe should come over to the factory, shoot some pictures. Write this thing up. I'd give you the exclusive. You guys beat out all the other papers, get a little glory. We'd sure love the PR. That never hurts. You come and I'll give you the guided tour of the place, how's that?"

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He adjusts his tie again on the way to reaching into his coat and coming up with a business card. The card has a spinning globe on it, with tiny lights flashing here and there as the world spins. Coopersmith smiles. "Clever, isn't it? The engine's embedded in the card. Doesn't take much to drive a little animation. You be sure and have Joe give me a call real soon."

He turns his back, striking up another conversation almost immediately. You've been dismissed. Heading over to where Joe stands balancing a plate of ribs, you glance back.

Coopersmith with eyes downcast listens to another man talk, his hand fiddling with the knot on his tie again.

You might not have been sure at first, but you are now: He was the one on the catwalk, watching as you edged around the factory floor while the Virgin paid her visit.

Joe says, "So?"

"He offered us the exclusive on their new program for NASA."

"You have been blessed, my son. An overlord has smiled upon you." He tips his glass.

When you tell Margarita what you suspect, she isn't surprised so much as hurt. Even though she'd been certain of the fraud, the fact of it stings her. By association, you're part of her pain. Although she welcomed you back with a kiss, after the news she doesn't want to touch at all. She withdraws into smoke and drink, and finally wanders off with her cold black camera into the *colonia,* disgusted, she says, with the human race and God himself. You begin to realize that despite her tough cynical skin, there's at least a kernel of Margarita that wanted the miracle in all its glory. Beneath your rejection, does some part of you want it, too? Once in awhile in seeking for truth it would be nice to find something better than truth.

Later, in the dark, she comes back, slides down beside you on the mattress and starts to cry. From her that's an impossible sound, so terrifying that it paralyzes you. It's the sound of betrayal, the very last crumb of purity floating away.

You reach over to hold her, and she pushes your hand away. So you lie there, unable to take back the knowledge, the doubt, the truth, and knowing that the betrayal will always be tied to you. There's nothing you can do to change it.

The first opportunity you have, you swap your goggles with Gabriel Perea. The only place you can do this is at lunch. You have to wait for a day when he carries the goggles off the assembly line straight to the lunch area. You sit with him, listening to other workers ask him things about the Virgin. He looks at you edgily. He knows he's supposed to pretend that you've never met, but you're making this impossible by sitting there beside him. Making the switch is child's play. Everyone's staring at him, hanging on his every word. You set your goggles beside his, and then pick up the wrong pair a minute later and walk away.

Close up, you can see that his goggles have a slight refractive coating. He's going to know immediately what's happened, but with luck he won't be able to do anything about it. He won't want to be seen talking to you in the middle of the factory.

If Perea remotely shares your suspicions about the Virgin's appearances, he hasn't admitted it even to himself. This makes you think of Margarita,

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and your face burns with still more betrayal. It's too late, you tell yourself. This is what you came here to do.

Two days later, ten feet up in the forklift, you get what you wanted: The Virgin Mary appears to you.

It's a bare wall, concrete brick and metal conduits, and suddenly there she is. She floats in the air and when you look through the cage front of the forklift she is floating beyond it. The cage actually cuts her off. It's incredible. Wherever you look, she has a fixed location, an anchored spot in space. If you look up, her image remains fixed, sliding down the glasses. Somehow the circuit monitors your vision, tracks the turn of your head. "Feedback loops"—wasn't that what Coopersmith said? It must be automatic, though. She may recognize the geometry, but not the receiver, because the first thing out of her mouth is: *"Te amo, Gabriel, mi profeta."* So much for divinity. She doesn't know you've swapped goggles even if the goggles themselves do.

She is beautiful. Her hair, peeking out beneath a white wimple, is black. The blue of her robes is almost painful to see. No sky could match it. Her oval face is serene, a distillation of a million tender mothers. Oh, they're good, whoever created her. Who *wouldn't* want to believe in this Mary? Gabriel couldn't help but succumb.

The camera in your pocket is useless.

She reminds you of your duty to your flock. She promises that you will all live in glory and comfort in Heaven after this life of misery and toil, and not to blame—

In the middle of her speech, she vanishes.

It's so quick that you almost keel forward out of your seat, thank God for the harness.

You can guess what happened. Management came out for their afternoon show, and things were wrong. Gabriel Perea, the poor bastard, didn't respond. He's still somewhere, attaching diodes to little green boards, unaware that divinity has dropped by to see him again.

You lower the forklift, and get out, unable to help one last glance up into the air, looking for her. A mere scintilla, a Tinkerbell of light would do, but there is nothing. Nothing.

The last hour and a half you go about your business as usual. Nothing has changed, nothing can have changed. Your hope is they think their circuits or the goggles malfunctioned, something failed to project. Who knows what sort of feedback system was at work there—it has to be sophisticated to have dodged every solid shape in front of you. They'll want to see his goggles at the end of his shift.

No one seems to be watching you yet. No one calls you in off the floor. So at the end of the day you drop the goggles in the trash and leave with the others in your shift. Everyone's talking about going home, how hot it is, how much they'd like a bath or a beer. Everything's so normal it sets your teeth on edge. You ride the bus down the highway and get off with a dozen others at the road for your *colonia*.

It's on the dusty cowpath of a road, on foot, that they grab you. Three of them. They know who they're looking for, and everyone else knows to stay out of it. These guys are *las pandillas,* the kind who'd kill someone for standing too close to them. A dozen people are all moving away, down the road, and the backward glances they give you are looks of farewell. *Adios, amigo.* Won't be seeing you again. They know it and so do you. You've seen

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the photos. The thousand merciless ways people don't come home, and you're about to become one.

The first guy walks straight up as if he's going to walk by, but suddenly his elbow swings right up into your nose, and the sky goes black and shiny at the same time, and time must have jumped because you're on your knees, blood flowing out between your fingers, but you don't remember getting there. And then you're on your back, looking at the sky, and still it seems no one's said a word to you, but your head is ringing, blood roaring like a waterfall. Someone laid you out. Each pose is a snapshot of pain. Each time there's less of you to shoot. They'll compress you, maybe for hours, maybe for days—that's how it works, isn't it? How long before gasoline and a match? Will you feel anything by then?

You stare up at the sky, at the first few stars, and wait for the inevitable continuation. The bodies get buried in the Lote Bravo. At least you know where you're going. In a couple of months someone might find you. Will Joe come looking?

Someone yells, "¡Aguila!" and a door slams. Or is that in your head, too?

Footsteps approach. Here it comes, you think. Is there anything you can do to prepare for the pain? Probably not, no.

The face that peers down at you doesn't help. Hispanic, handsome, well-groomed. This could be any businessman in Mexico, but you know it isn't, and you remember someone—Margarita?—telling you about the *narcotraficantes* investing in the maquiladora, taking their drug money and buying into international trade. Silent partners.

"Not going to hurt you, *keemo sabe,*" he's saying with a sly grin, as though your broken nose and battered skull don't exist. "Couldn't do that. No, no. Questions would be asked about you—you're not just some factory whore, are you?" His grin becomes a sneer—you've never actually seen anyone sneer before. This guy hates women for a hobby. "No, no," he says again, "you're a second rate wedding photographer who thought he was Dick fucking Tracy. What did you do, hang out with the Juarez photo-locos and get all righteous? Sure, of course you did." He kneels, clucking his tongue. You notice that he's holding your Minox. "Listen, *cholo,* you print what you've uncovered, and Señor Perea will die. You think that's a threat, hey? But it's not. You'll make him out a fool to his own people. They trust him, you know? It's all they got, so you go ahead and take it from them and see what you get. *We* care so much, we're lettin' you go home. Here." He tosses the camera into the dirt. "You're only a threat to the people who think like you do, man." Now he grabs your arm and pulls you upright. The world threatens to flip on you, and your stomach promises to go with it if it does. Close up, he smells of citrus cologne. He whispers to you, "Go home, *cholo,* go take pictures of little kids in swimming pools and cats caught in trees and armadillos squashed on the highway. Amateurs don't survive. Neither do professionals, here. Next time, you gonna meet some of them." Then he just walks away. You're left wobbling on the road. The gang of three are gone, too. Nobody's around. Behind you, you hear a car door and the rev of an engine. A silver SUV shoots off down the dirt road, back to the pavement and away. There's a rusted barbed wire fence there, and someone's stuck a clown-doll's head on one of the posts.

You stumble along the path to the *colonia*. Your head feels as tender as the skin of a plum. Your sinuses are clogged with blood and your nose creaks when you inhale. People watch in awe as you approach your shack.

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In that moment you're as much a miracle to them as Gabriel Perea. They probably think they're seeing a ghost. And they're right, aren't they? You aren't here any longer.

Margarita's not inside. Her camera's gone. There's no one to comfort you, no one to hear how you were written off. The heat inside is like the core of the sun. Back outside you walk to the water barrel, no longer concerned with what contaminants float in it. You splash water on your face, over your head. Benzene? Who cares? You're dead anyway. You touch your nose and it's swollen up the size of a saguaro. Embarrassing how easily you've been persuaded to leave. It didn't take anything at all, did it? One whack and a simple "Go away, Señor, you're a fool." What, did you think you could change the world? Make a difference? Not a second rate wedding photographer like you. Not someone with an apartment and a bed and an office and a car. Compromised by the good life. Nobody who leads your life is going to make the difference over here. It takes a breed of insanity you can't even approach.

Baum was dead wrong about everything. He simplified the problems to fit the views of a tired old campus radical, but they aren't simple. Answers aren't simple. You, you're simple.

Two little girls kneel not far from the barrel, cooking their meal in tin pans on top of an iron plate mounted over an open flame. There's a rusted electrical box beside them, with outlet holes like eyes and a wide slit for a switch. It's a robot face silently screaming. The girls watch you even when they're not looking.

Long after it gets dark you're still alone inside. Margarita must be off on some adventure, doing what she does best, what you can't do. You've had hours to build upon your inadequacy. Run your story and they'll tear Perea apart. He was doomed the moment he believed in the possibility of her. Just like the Church and the little Catholic boy you were once. When you see that, you don't want to see Margarita. You don't want to have to explain why you aren't going any further. All you can do is hurt her. Only a threat is all you can be.

You pack up your few things, leaving the dozen film canisters you didn't use. Let the real photojournalist have them. "*Nada que ver,*" you tell the empty room.

Back across the border before midnight, before your life turns back into a pumpkin—better she *should* think you're lying under three feet of dirt.

A month rolls by in a sort of fog. Booze, pain killers and the hell-bent desire to forget your own name. Your nose is healing. It's a little crooked, has a bluish bump in the middle. Baum keeps his distance and doesn't ask you anything about your story, though at first you're too busy to notice. Then one day you find out from the sports editor that Joe got a package while you were gone, and although nobody knows what was in it, when he opened it, he turned white as a ghost and just packed up his office and went home. Called in sick the next three days and really screwed up a bunch of deadlines.

When you do try and talk to him about what happened, he interrupts with an angry "Don't think you're the first person who's been smashed on the rocks of old Juarez." Then he walks away. They got to him somehow. If they wanted to, they could get to both of you. Like the wind, this can blow across the river. The message was for you.

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Then one day while you're placing ad graphics, Joe Baum comes over and sits beside you. He won't look you in the eye. Very softly he says, "Got a call from Chicken Man. Margarita Espinada's dead."

You stare at the page on the monitor so hard you're seeing the pixels. Finally, you ask him, "What happened?"

"Don't know. Don't know who did it. She's been gone for weeks and weeks, but he said that wasn't unusual. She lived mostly in her car."

"I know. Auto-loco."

"Yeah." He starts to get up, but as if his weight is too much for him, he drops back onto the chair. "Um, he says she left a package for you. Addressed to him, so maybe whatever happened, she had some warning." With every word he puts more distance between himself and her death. "There's gonna be a funeral tomorrow if you're interested."

"So soon?"

Baum makes a face, lips pressed tight. Defiantly he meets your gaze. "She was dumped in the Lote Bravo awhile ago."

Pollamano nods sadly as he lets you in. "*¿Quiubo,* Deputy?" he asks, but not with any interest. His eyes are bloodshot, drunk or crying, maybe both. Some others are there inside. A few nod—some you remember. Most of them pretend you aren't there. Her body lies in la Catedral, three blocks from Chicken Man's current abode. You shouldn't see it, is what they say. Their newest member took pictures: Ernesto. He was there, following the cops with his police band radio the way he always does, always trying to get to the scene before they do. He'd taken half a dozen shots before he saw the black boots and realized whose body he was photographing. They'd torn off most of her clothes but left the boots so everyone would know who she was.

Everyone drinks, toasting her memory. One of them begins weeping and someone else throws an arm around him and mutters. One of the others spits. None of them seems to suspect that you and she spent time together. In any case, you're an interloper on their private grief, and not one of them.

Margarita must have known you weren't dead—otherwise, why send a package for you?

Late in the afternoon, everyone has shown up, almost two dozen photographers, and some unseen sign passes among you all, and everyone rises up and goes out together. You move in a line through the crowds, between white buses in a traffic snarl and across the square to the neon cathedral. Orange lights bathe you all. Ernesto with his nothing mustache runs up to the door and snaps a picture. Even in this solemn moment, his instinct is for the image. A few glare at him, but no one chastises him. You gather in the front pews, kneel, pray, go up one by one and light your candles for her soul. Your hand is shaking so hard you can hardly ignite the wick.

After everyone else has left he gives you the package. It's nearly the size of a suitcase. He says, "She left it for you, and I don't violate her wishes. She was here a couple times when I wasn't around. Using the darkroom."

You pull out a folder of photos. On top is the picture of you she took the first day you arrived in *Colonia Universidad*. You look like you could take on anything—that's what she captured of you, what she saw in you. Just looking at it is humiliating.

Underneath is her collection of shots inside the factory. The top photo is Gabriel Perea standing all twisted and pointing. Foam on his mouth, eyes

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bugging out. The image is spoiled because of some fogging on the left side of it as if there was a light leak. Whatever caused it lit up Perea, too.

You almost miss the thing that's different: He's not wearing his goggles.

You go on to the next shot, but it's a picture of the crowd behind him, all staring, wide-eyed. She's not using a flash, but there's some kind of light source. In the third, fourth, and fifth shots you see it. It shines straight at Perea. There are lens flares in each image. The light is peculiar, diffuse, as if a collection of small bulbs are firing off, making a sort of ring. The middle is hard to make out until the sixth picture. She must have slid on her knees between all the onlookers to get it. Perea's feet are close by and out of focus. The light is the center of the image, the light that is different in each shot.

"Jaime," you say, "do you have a loupe?"

"Of course." He gives it to you. You hold it over the image, over the light. Back in the lab at the *Herald,* you'll blow the image up poster size to see the detail without the lens—the outline, and at the top of it a bunch of smudges, a hint of eye sockets and mouth, a trace of nose and cheek. Can an AI break loose from its handlers? you wonder. Does it have a will? Or is this the next step in the plan?

You give the loupe back.

He says, "That Perea is gone. Disappeared. People are looking all over for him. They say he was called up to heaven."

One way or another, that's probably true. If the Virgin can float on the air now, then they don't need an interpreter. Belief itself will do the work hereafter, hope used as a halter.

"That crazy girl, she went right back into that factory even after he was gone."

You wipe at your eyes, and a half-laugh escapes you. *That crazy girl.*

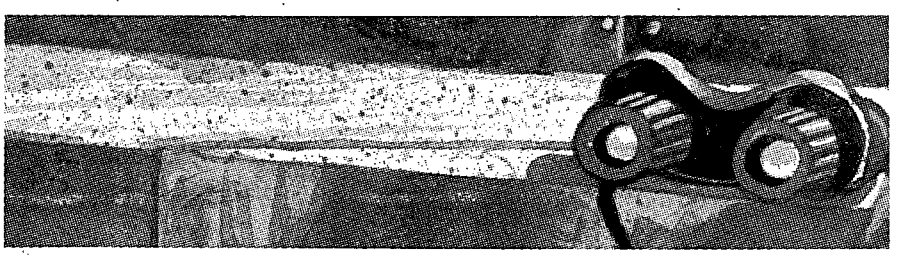
You close the folder. You can't let anyone have these. That's the ultimate, wrenching realization. Margarita died because of this and no one can see it. The story can't be told, because it's a lie. She knew it, too, but she went ahead, shooting what was real.

This is your Sacred Heart. Your rusting nail. Gabriel Perea was called up to heaven or killed—for you it doesn't matter which. By revealing nothing you let him go on living.

Under the top folder there are others full of negatives, hundreds of inverted images of the world—black teeth and faces, black suns and black clouds. The world made new. Made hers. There *is* a way you can keep her alive.

Jaime pats you on the shoulder as you leave with your burden. "You go home, Deputy," he tells you. "Even the devil won't live *here.*" ○

—for Sycamore Hill 1999



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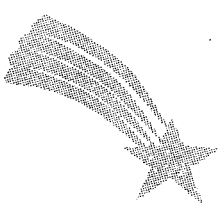
ANACHRONISM

A mammoth, frozen
in Siberian tundra
for twice 10,000 years,

is exhumed at last.
embedded in the right tusk:
a tracking device

—Keith Allen Daniels



Keith Allen Daniels
1956-2001

Keith Allen Daniels, one of our most talented poets, died at home after a long illness on December 18, 2001. His wife, Toni Luna Montealegre, was at his side. Keith's first poem for *Asimov's,* "Numbers of the Beast," appeared in our November 1993 issue. Sadly, his fourteenth poem, "Anachronism," will be his last. We will miss his insightful work.

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A GREAT DAY FOR BRONTOSAURS

Michael Swanwick

Michael Swanwick is currently at work on two weekly online short-story series. In the one for SciFiction <http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/>, the tales are inspired by the Periodic Table of Elements. In his series for the Infinity Matrix <http://www.infinitematrix.net>, The Sleep of Reason, each story is accompanied by a Goya etching. Mr. Swanwick's new dinosaur novel, *Bones of the Earth*, is just out from Eos. The Hugo-award-winning short story, "Scherzo with Tyrannosaur" (July 1999), was a rough draft for part of the novel.

"You're going to love this guy," the Project Director said.

"I doubt it," the Financial Officer said. "Quite frankly, I have my doubts about the entire project. I really can't see dedicating that much capital to a . . . well, pardon me for saying this, but a fantasy, really. Where's the profit? What's the point? I'm afraid you've chosen the wrong one to pass on this."

"But that's exactly why I *did* choose you," the Project Director said. "If I can get your approval, the others will be easy."

"You're a visionary," the Financial Officer said. No one could have mistaken this for a compliment. "Shall we get on with it?"

The Project Director touched a device on the table beside him, and said, "Mr. Adams? Would you come in now?"

The door opened. Adams was a lanky man in his late twenties, all wrists, elbows, and throat. He had high cheekbones, and a bright and glittering eye. He grinned as he came in, as if he couldn't wait to explain himself.

Introductions were made. He took a seat. Then the Project Director said, "Well, we're finally gearing up to decide whether to fund the project or not."

"Good!" the young man said too loudly. He blushed. "Excuse me, I get a little overexcited on this subject."

"No, no, enthusiasm is a good thing in a researcher." The Project Director smiled encouragingly.

The Financial Officer cleared his throat. "So, I gather you're talking about cloning dinosaurs," he said in a dubious tone.

"No, sir. You're thinking of *Jurassic Park*. Wonderful movie. I saw a video of it when I was a kid, and I knew right then and there that I wanted to study dinosaurs when I grew up. But, alas, no, that's all hogwash. Even then they knew, really, that it couldn't be done."

The Financial Officer looked baffled. "Why not?"

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"Okay, let's crunch a few numbers. The human genome contains about three billion base pairs. . . ."

"Base pairs?"

"Base pairs are—" The young man paused. "Can I wildly oversimplify?"

"Please do," the Financial Officer said dryly.

"If the genome is the complete description of a living creature, then the base pairs are the alphabet in which that description is written. It's a four-letter alphabet consisting of the letters G, A, T, and C, for Guanine, Adenine . . ."

The Financial Officer said, "Yes, I think we understand that part sufficiently now."

Adams laughed. "I told you I was an enthusiast! Anyway, humans have over three billion base pairs. The fruit fly has one hundred eighty million. The *E. coli* bacterium has four point six million. And there's a lizard that has one hundred eleven billion base pairs. So there's a great deal of variation here."

"How many would a dinosaur have?" the Financial Officer asked.

"Good question! Nobody knows, not really. But a good bet would be that it comes out somewhere in the range of a house finch. Say, two billion base pairs. Now most of that is going to be junk DNA—nonsense sequences that code for impossible protein substances, incomplete duplicates, and so on. Even so, we're talking about a lot of very complex code. Now ask me what the longest string of fossil dino DNA we've recovered so far is."

"How much?"

"Three hundred base pairs! And those were from mitochondrial DNA. The problem is that DNA is fragile stuff. And tiny. Most of the fossils we've ever found have been of the hard parts of animals. Bones, teeth, shells. Soft tissue is only preserved under extremely rare conditions. In fossils as old as the Mesozoic, it's not the tissue itself that's preserved, but an imprint of it. So the whole fossil cloning thing is just a pipe dream. It's simply not going to happen."

"Thank you," the Project Director said. "I think that sums up the difficulties."

"But even supposing we *could* somehow patch together a complete set of genes for a dino-zygote, we *still* couldn't build one. Because we don't have a dinosaur egg."

"What would we need an egg for?" the Financial Officer asked. "I thought we were talking about cloning."

"We need an egg because it's a complex mechanism that not only nurtures the zygote, but tells it which genes to express and which to repress, and in what order. Having a zygote without an egg is like having all the parts for a supercomputer, and no instructions on how to put them together."

"So . . . if it can't be done," the Financial Officer said, "I don't understand why we're even having this meeting."

The Project Director chuckled. "Our Mr. Adams is a scientist, I fear, not a salesman."

"Oh, but it's only *cloning* that's impossible," Adams said intensely. "We can still have dinosaurs! We can *back-engineer* them. We can build a dinosaur out of existing material. We start with a bird . . ."

"A bird! Birds aren't dinosaurs."

"Cladistically speaking, they are. Birds are directly descended from coelurosaurs, which means that they *are* dinosaurs, in the same sense that you and I, having backbones and thus being descended from the first primitive creatures with notochords, are chordates, *and* vertebrates, *and* mam-

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mals, *and* anthropoids, *and* human beings all at one and the same time. A bird is simply a dinosaur that's evolved into something more elaborate. It's a refinement, not something new.

"Most of the old instructions are still there, waiting to be turned on again. Tweak one simple gene sequence, and birds sprout teeth again! Tweak another and their wings have claws. Those traits that have been lost entirely can be borrowed from the genes of other creatures—crocodiles and salamanders and whatnot. It's simply a matter of picking and choosing. After all, we know the outcome we want."

"We can do this," the Project Director said. "We have the tools."

The Financial Officer shook his head in wonderment.

"Now we've got the genes, and we insert them into a specially prepared ostrich ovum, and let it grow into a full-sized egg within the mother."

"An ostrich egg? Would that be large enough?"

"Very few dinosaur eggs were much larger. Apatosaurs were so tiny at birth that nobody's been able to figure out how the mothers avoided stepping on them."

"You'd be starting out with apatosaurs, then?"

"No, we'll start out easy, with galimimuses and troodons—beasts not too far distant, genetically speaking, from living birds. Then we'll expand outward, to allosaurs and plateosaurs, stegosaurs and apatosaurs."

"Marketing has decided to go with 'brontosaurs' rather than 'apatosaurs,'" the Project Director said. "It's got a more commercial ring to it."

"But it's not—"

"—in accord with the rules of scientific nomenclature. Yes, yes. Tell me, which would you rather have—a living, breathing *Brontosaurus,* or plans for an *Apatosaurus* that never got funded?"

The young man flushed, but said nothing.

"Now, as I understand it," the Financial Officer said, "you'll be wanting to establish breeding populations. Won't that be a little tricky? The environment has changed a great deal from Mesozoic times. Will the herbivores even be able to eat contemporary plants?"

"Oh, we can work up some chow for them. As for the environment . . . well, there'd be a certain amount of trickery involved there, I'm afraid. We don't have any continental expanses of land at hand to turn over to them. But we've done wonders with zoos. We could create an environment good enough to fool the dinosaurs themselves. Good enough to make them happy." Eyes gleaming, the young man said, "Give me the funding, and within the year I'll show you something indistinguishable from a living dinosaur."

"Would it actually be a dinosaur, though?"

"Would it *be* a dinosaur? No. Would it act and behave and think like one? Pretty damn close."

"Well!" The Project Director slapped his hands together. "I told you our young fellow would give you a good show."

The Financial Officer looked thoughtful. "I've only got one more question," he said. "Why?"

"Why, sir?"

"Yes, *why?* Why even bother? Dinosaurs have been dead for . . . for millions of years. They had their shot. Why bring them back?"

"Because dinosaurs are wonderful animals! Of *course* we want them back! What is so beautiful and useless as a dinosaur? Who *wouldn't* want to have them around?"

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The Financial Officer turned toward the Project Director and nodded. The Project Director stood. "Thank you, Mr. Adams."

"Thank you, sir! For giving me this chance, I mean. To explain what I want to do."

Almost stumbling over himself in his eagerness to make a good impression, the young man left the room.

When the door closed, the Project Director and the Financial Officer looked at one another. Their human shapes wavered and collapsed, revealing their true forms.

The Project Director stretched, shaking out his feathers. "Well?"

"He's wonderful!" the Financial Officer said. "He's everything you said he would be."

"I told you so. Humans are such delightful creatures! So inquisitive, so inventive! I think everyone will agree that they're a ornament to the world."

"Well, you've certainly sold *me*."

"You're satisfied, then?"

"Yes."

"You're prepared to support me for Phase Two? The creation of an environment, and establishment of a permanent breeding population?"

"If the female makes as good an impression, then yes. I'd have to say I am."

"Excellent! Let's interview her right now."

The Project Director shimmered back into human form. He touched the device on the table. "You can come in now, Eve." ❍

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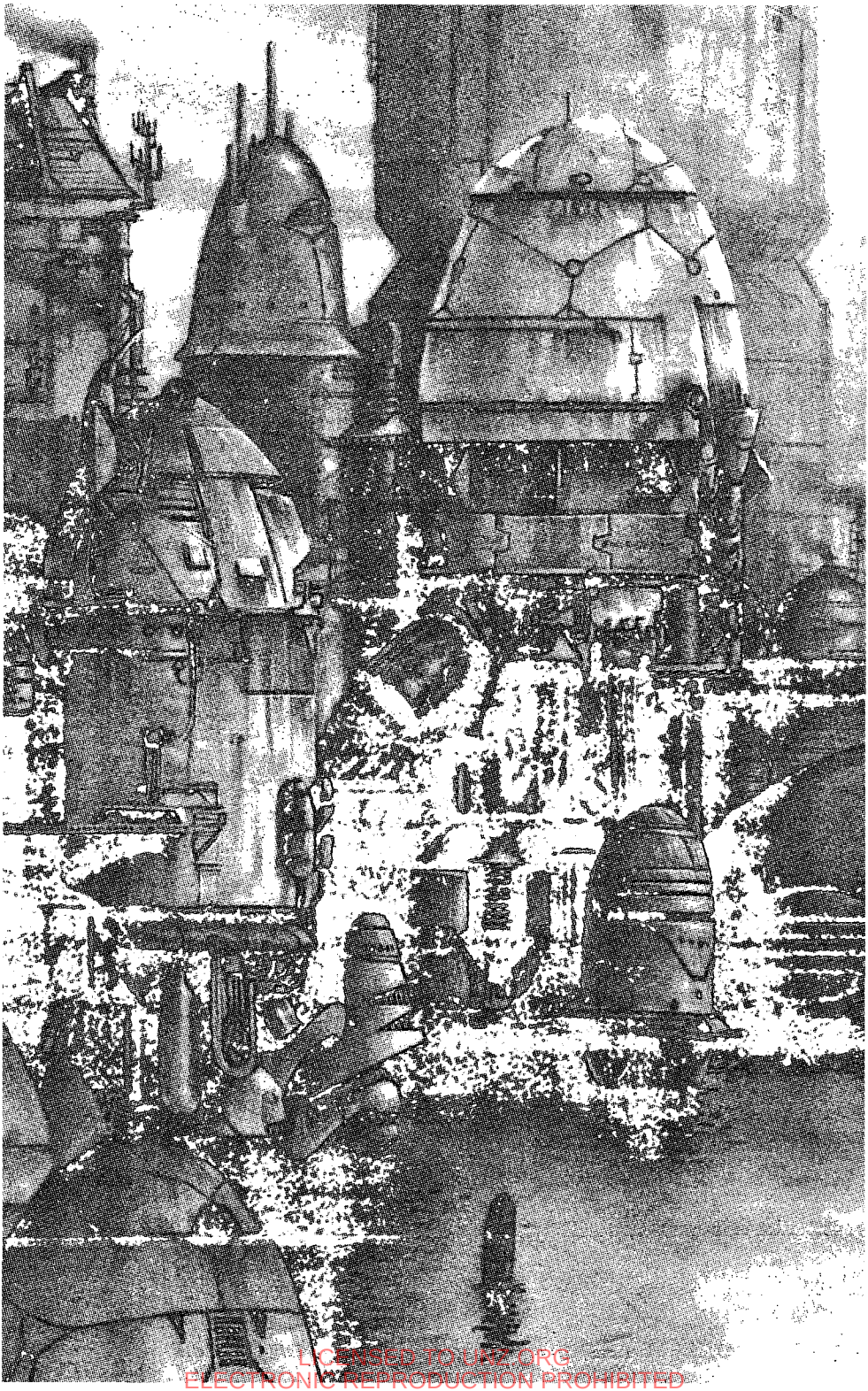

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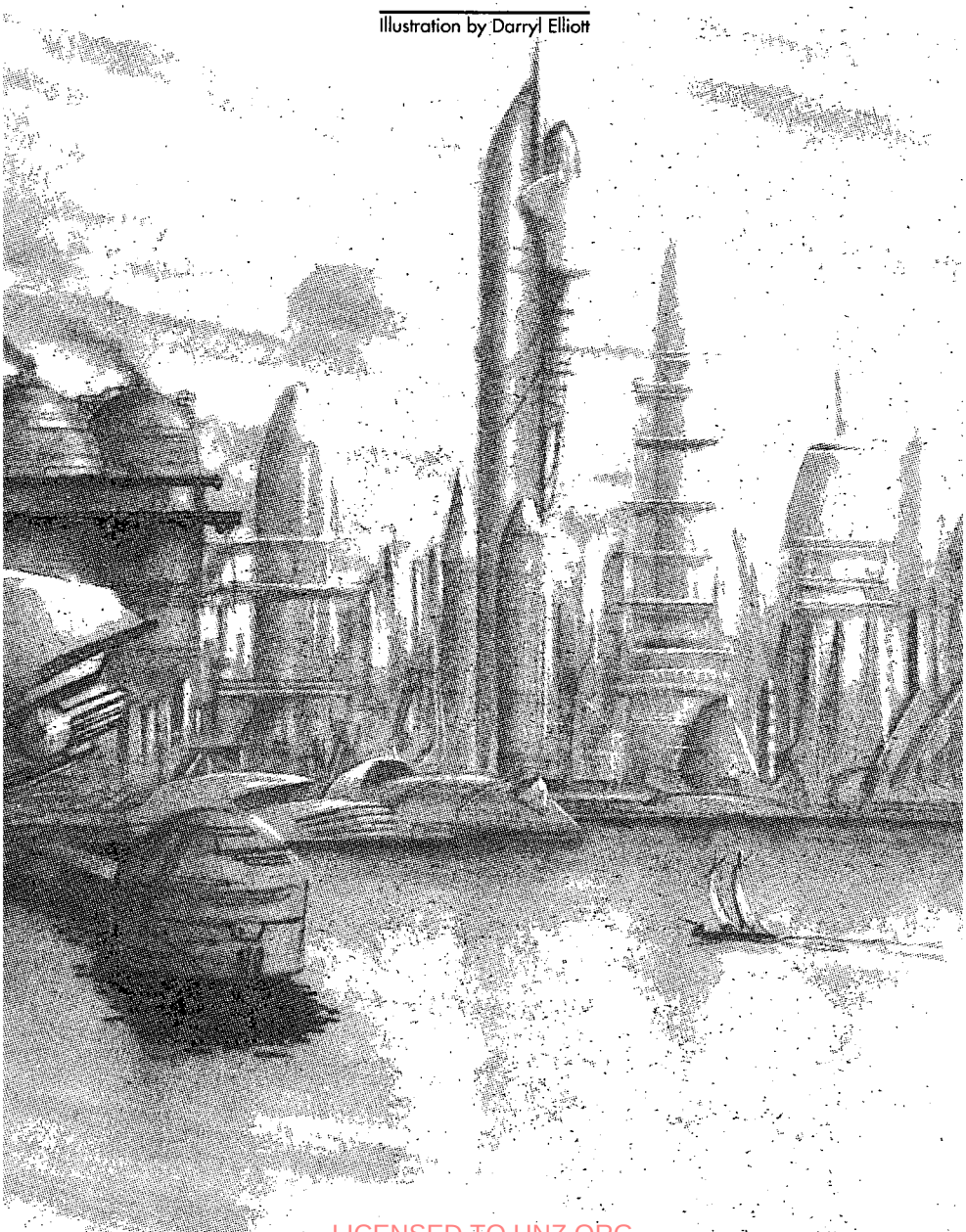
BREATHMOSS

Ian R. MacLeod

Illustration by Darryl Elliott



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Ian R. MacLeod tells us that at long last he is getting close to finishing a large Victorian alternate-world fantasy novel called *The Light Ages*. There's a possibility that he may also publish a novel version of "The Summer Isles" (*Asimov's*, October/November 1998). In the meantime, he's been working on material set in The Ten Thousand and One Worlds universe of his brilliant new novella, "Breathmoss." A sister story to this tale entitled "Isabel of the Fall" was published in *Interzone* last July, and he hopes to write more stories and a novel set in this stunning milieu.

1.

In her twelfth standard year, which on Habara was the Season of Soft Rains, Jalila moved across the mountains with her mothers from the high plains of Tabuthal to the coast. For all of them, the journey down was one of unhurried discovery, with the kamasheens long gone and the world freshly moist, and the hayawans rusting as they rode them, the huge flat plates of their feet swishing through purplish-green undergrowth. She saw the cliffs and qasrs she'd only visited from her dreamtent, and sailed across the high ridges on ropewalks her distant ancestors had built, which had seemed frail and antique to her in her worried imaginings, but were in fact strong and subtle; huge dripping gantries heaving from the mist like wise giants, softly humming, and welcoming her and her hayawan, whom she called Robin, in cocoons of effortless embrace. Swaying over the drop beyond into grey-green nothing was almost like flying.

The strangest thing of all in this journey of discoveries was that the landscape actually seemed to rise higher as they descended and encamped and descended again; the sense of *up* increased, rather than that of down. The air on the high plains of Tabuthal was rarefied—Jalila knew that from her lessons in her dreamtent; they were so close to the stars that Pavo had had to clap a mask over her face from the moment of her birth until the breathmoss was embedded in her lungs. And it had been clear up there, it was always clear, and it was pleasantly cold. The sun shone all day hard and cold and white from the blue blackness, as did a billion stars at night, although Jalila had never thought of those things as she ran amid the crystal trees and her mothers smiled at her and occasionally warned her that, one day, all of this would have to change.

And now that day was upon her, and this landscape—as Robin, her hayawan, rounded the path through an urrearth forest of alien-looking trees with wrinkled brown trunks and soft green leaves, and the land fell away, and she caught her first glimpse of something far and flat on the horizon—had never seemed so high.

Down on the coast, the mountains reared behind them and around a bay. There were many people here—not the vast numbers, perhaps, of Jalila's dreamtent stories of the Ten Thousand and One Worlds, but so many that

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she was sure, as she first walked the streets of a town where the buildings huddled in ridiculous proximity, and tried not to stare at all the faces, that she would never know all their families.

Because of its position at the edge of the mountains, the town was called Al Janb, and, to Jalila's relief, their new haramlek was some distance away from it, up along a near-unnoticeable dirt track that meandered off from the blue-black serraplated coastal road. There was much to be done there by way of repair, after the long season that her bondmother Lya had left the place deserted. The walls were fused stone, but the structure of the roof had been mostly made from the stuff of the same strange urrearth trees that grew up the mountains, and in many places it had sagged and leaked and grown back toward the chaos that seemed to want to encompass everything here. The hayawans, too, needed much attention in their makeshift stables as they adapted to this new climate, and mother Pavo was long employed constructing the necessary potions to mend the bleeding bonds of rusty metal and flesh, and then to counteract the mold that grew like slow tears across their long, solemn faces. Jalila would normally have been in anguish to think of the sufferings that this new climate was visiting on Robin, but she was too busy feeling ill herself to care. Ridiculously, seeing as there was so much more oxygen to breathe in this rich coastal air, every lungful became a conscious effort, a dreadful physical lunge. Inhaling the damp, salty, spore-laden atmosphere was like sucking soup through a straw. She grew feverish for a while, and suffered the attentions of similar molds to those that were growing over Robin, yet in even more irritating and embarrassing places. More irritating still was the fact that Ananke her birthmother and Lya her bondmother—even Pavo, who was still busily attending to the hayawans—treated her discomforts and fevers with airy disregard. They had, they all assured her vaguely, suffered similarly in their own youths. And the weather would soon change in any case. To Jalila, who had spent all her life in the cool unvarying glare of Tabuthal, where the wind only ever blew from one direction and the trees jingled like ice, that last statement might as well have been spoken in another language.

If anything, Jalila was sure that she was getting worse. The rain drummed on what there was of the roof of their haramlek, and dripped down and pooled in the makeshift awnings, which burst in bucketloads down your neck if you bumped into them, and the mist drifted in from every direction through the paneless windows, and the mountains, most of the time, seemed to consist of cloud, or to have vanished entirely. She was coughing. Strange stuff was coming out on her hands, slippery and green as the slime that tried to grow everywhere here. One morning, she awoke, sure that part of her was bursting, and stumbled from her dreamtent and out through the scaffolding that had by then surrounded the haramlek, then barefoot down the mud track and across the quiet black road and down onto the beach, for no other reason than that she needed to *escape*.

She stood gasping amid the rockpools, her hair lank and her skin feverishly itching. There was something at the back of her throat. There was something in her lungs. She was sure that it had taken root and was growing. Then she started coughing as she had never coughed before, and more of the greenstuff came splattering over her hands and down her chin. She doubled over. Huge lumps of it came showering out, strung with blood. If it hadn't been mostly green, she'd have been sure that it *was* her lungs. She'd never imagined anything so agonizing. Finally, though, in heaves and starts

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and false dawns, the process dwindled. She wiped her hands on her nightdress. The rocks all around her were splattered green. It was breathmoss; the stuff that had sustained her on the high plains. And *now* look at it! Jalila took a slow, cautious breath. And then another. Her throat ached. Her head was throbbing. But still, the process was suddenly almost ridiculously easy. She picked her way back across the beach, up through the mists to her haramlek. Her mothers were eating breakfast. Jalila sat down with them, wordlessly, and started to eat.

That night, Ananke came and sat with Jalila as she lay in her dreamtent in plain darkness and tried not to listen to the sounds of the rain falling on and through the creaking, dripping building. Even now, her birthmother's hands smelled and felt like the high desert as they touched her face. Rough and clean and warm, like rocks in starlight, giving off their heat. A few months before, Jalila would probably have started crying.

"You'll understand now, perhaps, why we thought it better not to tell you about the breathmoss. . . ?"

There was a question mark at the end of the sentence, but Jalila ignored it. They'd known all along! She was still angry.

"And there are other things, too, which will soon start to happen to your body. Things that are nothing to do with this place. And I shall now tell you about them all, even though you'll say you knew it before. . . ."

The smooth, rough fingers stroked her hair. As Ananke's words unraveled, telling Jalila of changings and swellings and growths she'd never thought would really apply to *her,* and which these fetid lowlands really seemed to have brought closer, Jalila thought of the sound of the wind, tinkling through the crystal trees up on Tabuthal. She thought of the dry cold wind in her face. The wet air here seemed to enclose her. She wished that she was running. She wanted to escape.

Small though Al Janb was, it was as big a town as Jalila had ever seen, and she soon came to volunteer to run all the various errands that her mothers required as they restored and repaired their haramlek. She was used to wide expanses, big horizons, the surprises of a giant landscape that crept upon you slowly, visible for miles. Yet here, every turn brought abrupt surprise and sudden change. The people had such varied faces and accents. They hung their washing across the streets, and bickered and smoked in public. Some ate with both hands. They stared at you as you went past, and didn't seem to mind if you stared back at them. There were unfamiliar sights and smells, markets that erupted on particular days to the workings of no calendar Jalila yet understood, and which sold, in glittering, shining, stinking, disgusting, fascinating arrays, the strangest and most wonderful things. There were fruits from off-planet, spices shaped like insects, and insects that you crushed for their spice. There were swarming vats of things Jalila couldn't possibly imagine any use for, and bright silks woven thin as starlit wind that she longed for with an acute physical thirst. And there were aliens, too, to be glimpsed sometimes wandering the streets of Al Janb, or looking down at you from its overhung top windows like odd pictures in old frames. Some of them carried their own atmosphere around with them in bubbling hookahs, and some rolled around in huge grey bits of the sea of their own planets, like babies in a birthsac. Some of them looked like huge versions of the spice insects, and the air around them buzzed angrily if you got too close. The only thing they had in common was that they seemed

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blithely unaware of Jalila as she stared and followed them, and then returned inexcusably late from whatever errand she'd supposedly been sent on. Sometimes, she forgot her errands entirely.

"You must learn to get *used* to things. . . ." Lya her bondmother said to her with genuine irritation late one afternoon, when she'd come back without the tool she'd been sent to get early that morning, or even any recollection of its name or function. "This or any other world will never be a home to you if you let every single thing *surprise* you. . . ." But Jalila didn't mind the surprises; in fact, she was coming to enjoy them, and the next time the need arose to visit Al Janb to buy a new growth-crystal for the scaffolding, she begged to be allowed to go, and her mothers finally relented, although with many a warning shake of the head.

The rain had stopped at last, or at least held back for a whole day, although everything still looked green and wet to Jalila as she walked along the coastal road toward the ragged tumble of Al Janb. She understood, at least in theory, that the rain would probably return, and then relent, and then come back again, but in a decreasing pattern, much as the heat was gradually *increasing,* although it still seemed ridiculous to her that no one could ever predict exactly how, or when, Habara's proper Season of Summers would arrive. Those boats she could see now, those fisherwomen out on their feluccas beyond the white bands of breaking waves, their whole lives were dictated by these uncertainties, and the habits of the shoals of whiteback that came and went on the oceans, and which could also only be guessed at in this same approximate way. The world down here on the coast was so *unpredictable* compared with Tabuthal! The markets, the people, the washing, the sun, the rain, the aliens. Even Hayam and Walah, Habara's moons, which Jalila was long used to watching, had to drag themselves through cloud like cannonballs though cotton as they pushed and pulled at this ocean. Yet today, as she clambered over the groynes of the long shingle beach that she took as a shortcut to the center of the town when the various tides were out, she saw a particular sight that surprised her more than any other.

There was a boat, hauled far up from the water, longer and blacker and heavier-looking than the feluccas, with a sort-of ramshackle house at the prow, and a winch at the stern that was so massive that Jalila wondered if it wouldn't tip the craft over if it ever actually entered the water. But, for all that, it wasn't the boat that first caught her eye, but the figure who was working on it. Even from a distance, as she struggled to heave some ropes, there was something different about her, and the way she was moving. Another alien? But she was plainly human. And barefoot, in ragged shorts, and bare-breasted. In fact, almost as flat-chested as Jalila still was, and probably of about her age and height. Jalila still wasn't used to introducing herself to strangers, but she decided that she could at least go over, and pretend an interest in—or an ignorance of—this odd boat.

The figure dropped another loop of rope over the gunwales with a grunt that carried on the smelly sea breeze. She was brown as tea, with her massy hair hooped back and hanging in a long tail down her back. She was broad-shouldered, and moved in that way that didn't quite seem wrong, but didn't seem entirely right either. As if, somewhere across her back, there was an extra joint. When she glanced up at the clatter of shingle as Jalila jumped the last groyne, Jalila got a proper full sight of her face, and saw that she was big-nosed, big-chinned, and that her features were oddly broad and flat. A child sculpting a person out of clay might have done better.

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"Have you come to help me?"

Jalila shrugged. "I might have done."

"That's a funny accent you've got."

They were standing facing each other. She had grey eyes, which looked odd as well. Perhaps she was an off-worlder. That might explain it. Jalila had heard that there were people who had things done to themselves so they could live in different places. She supposed the breathmoss was like that, although she'd never thought of it that way. And she couldn't quite imagine why it would be a requirement for living on any world that you looked this ugly.

"Everyone talks oddly here," she replied. "But then your accent's funny as well."

"I'm Kalal. And that's just my *voice*. It's not an accent." Kalal looked down at her oily hands, perhaps thought about wiping one and offering it to shake, then decided not to bother.

"Oh. . . ?"

"You don't get it, do you?" That gruff voice. The odd way her features twisted when she smiled.

"What is there to get? You're just—"

"—I'm a man." Kalal picked up a coil of rope from the shingle, and nodded to another beside it. "Well? Are you going to help me with this, or aren't you?"

The rains came again, this time starting as a thing called *drizzle,* then working up the scale to *torrent*. The tides washed especially high. There were storms, and white crackles of lightening, and the boom of a wind that was so unlike the kamasheen. Jalila's mothers told her to be patient, to wait, and to remember—*please* remember this time, so you don't waste the day for us all, Jalilaneen—the things that they sent her down the serraplate road to get from Al Janb. She trudged under an umbrella, another new and useless coastal object, which turned itself inside out so many times that she ended up throwing it into the sea, where it floated off quite happily, as if that was the element for which it was intended in the first place. Almost all of the feluccas were drawn up on the far side of the roadway, safe from the madly bashing waves, but there was no sign of that bigger craft belonging to Kalal. Perhaps he—the antique genderative word *was* he, wasn't it?—was out there, where the clouds rumbled like boulders. Perhaps she'd imagined their whole encounter entirely.

Arriving back home at the haramlek surprisingly quickly, and carrying for once the things she'd been ordered to get, Jalila dried herself off and buried herself in her dreamtent, trying to find out from it all that she could about these creatures called *men*. Like so many things about life at this awkward, interesting, difficult time, men were something Jalila would have insisted she definitely already knew about a few months before up on Tabuthal. Now, she wasn't so sure. Kalal, despite his ugliness and his funny rough-squeaky voice and his slightly odd smell, looked little like the hairy-faced werewolf figures of her childhood stories, and seemed to have no particular need to shout or fight, to carry her off to his rancid cave, or to start collecting odd and pointless things that he would then try to give her. There had once, Jalila's dreamtent told her, for obscure biological reasons she didn't quite follow, been far more men in the universe; almost as many as there had been women. Obviously, they had dwindled. She then checked on the

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word *rape,* to make sure it really was the thing she'd imagined, shuddered, but nevertheless investigated in full holographic detail the bits of himself that Kalal had kept hidden beneath his shorts as she'd helped stow those ropes. She couldn't help feeling sorry for him. It was all so pointless and ugly. Had his birth been an accident? A curse? She began to grow sleepy. The subject was starting to bore her. The last thing she remembered learning was that Kalal wasn't a proper man at all, but a *boy*—a half-formed thing; the equivalent to girl—another old urrearth word. Then sleep drifted over her, and she was back with the starlight and the crystal trees of Tabuthal, and wondering as she danced with her own reflection which of them was changing.

By next morning, the sun was shining as if she would never stop. As Jalila stepped out onto the newly formed patio, she gave the blazing light the same sort of an appraising *what-are-you-up-to-now* glare that her mothers gave her when she returned from Al Janb. The sun had done this trick before of seeming permanent, then vanishing by lunchtime into sodden murk, but today her brilliance continued. As it did the day after. And the day after that. Half a month later, even Jalila was convinced that the Season of Summers on Habara had finally arrived.

The flowers went mad, as did the insects. There were colors everywhere, pulsing before your eyes, swarming down the cliffs toward the sea, which lay flat and placid and salt-rimed, like a huge animal, basking. It remained mostly cool in Jalila's dreamtent, and the haramlek by now was a place of tall malqaf windtowers and flashing fans and well-like depths, but stepping outside beyond the striped shade of the mashrabiyas at midday felt like being hit repeatedly across the head with a hot iron pan. The horizons had drawn back; the mountains, after a few last rumbles of thunder and mist, as if they were clearing their throats, had finally announced themselves to the coastline in all their majesty, and climbed up and up in huge stretches of forest into stone limbs that rose and tangled until your eyes grew tired of rising. Above them, finally, was the sky, which was always blue in this season; the blue color of flame. Even at midnight, you caught the flash and swirl of flame.

Jalila learned to follow the advice of her mothers, and to change her daily habits to suit the imperious demands of this incredible, fussy, and demanding weather. If you woke early, and then drank lots of water, and bowed twice in the direction of Al'Toman while she was still a pinprick in the west, you could catch the day by surprise, when dew lay on the stones and pillars, and the air felt soft and silky as the arms of the ghostly women who sometimes visited Jalila's nights. Then there was breakfast, and the time of work, and the time of study, and Ananke and Pavo would quiz Jalila to ensure that she was following the prescribed Orders of Knowledge. By midday, though, the shadows had drawn back and every trace of moisture had evaporated, and your head swarmed with flies. You sought your own company, and didn't even want *that,* and wished, as you tossed and sweated in your dreamtent, for frost and darkness. Once or twice, just to prove to herself that it could be done, Jalila had tried walking to Al Janb at this time, although of course everything was shut and the whole place wobbled and stank in the heat like rancid jelly. She returned to the haramlek gritty and sweaty, almost crawling, and with a pounding ache in her head.

By evening, when the proper order of the world had righted itself, and

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Al'Toman would have hung in the east if the mountains hadn't swallowed her, and the heat, which never vanished, had assumed a smoother, more manageable quality, Jalila's mothers were once again hungry for company, and for food and for argument. These evenings, perhaps, were the best of all the times that Jalila could remember of her early life on the coast of Habara's single great ocean, at that stage in her development from child to adult when the only thing of permanence seemed to be the existence of endless, fascinating change. *How* they argued! Lya, her bondmother, and the oldest of her parents, who wore her grey hair loose as cobwebs with the pride of her age, and waved her arms as she talked and drank, wreathed in endless curls of smoke. Little Pavo, her face smooth as a carved nutmeg, with her small, precise hands, and who knew so much but rarely said anything with insistence. And Jalila's birthmother Ananke, for whom, of her three mothers, Jalila had always felt the deepest, simplest love, who would always touch you before she said anything, and then fix you with her sad and lovely eyes, as if touching and seeing were far more important than any words. Jalila was older now. She joined in with the arguments—of course, she had *always* joined in, but she cringed to think of the stumbling inanities to which her mothers had previously had to listen, while, now, at last, she had real, proper things to say about life, whole new philosophies that no one else on the Ten Thousand Worlds and One had ever thought of. . . . Most of the time, her mothers listened. Sometimes, they even acted as if they were persuaded by their daughter's wisdom.

Frequently, there were visitors to these evening gatherings. Up on Tabuthal, visitors had been rare animals, to be fussed over and cherished and only reluctantly released for their onward journey across the black dazzling plains. Down here, where people were nearly as common as stones on the beach, a more relaxed attitude reigned. Sometimes, there were formal invitations that Lya would issue to someone who was *this* or *that* in the town, or more often Pavo would come back with a person she had happened to meet as she poked around for lifeforms on the beach, or Ananke would softly suggest a *neighbor* (another new word and concept to Jalila) might like to *pop in* (ditto). But Al Janb was still a small town, and the dignitaries generally weren't that dignified, and Pavo's beach wanderers were often shy and slight as she was, while *neighbor* was frequently a synonym for *boring.* Still, Jalila came to enjoy most kinds of company, if only so that she could hold forth yet more devastatingly on whatever universal theory of life she was currently developing.

The flutter of lanterns and hands. The slow breath of the sea. Jalila ate stuffed breads and fuul and picked at the mountains of fruit and sucked lemons and sweet blue rutta and waved her fingers. The heavy night insects, glowing with the pollen they had collected, came bumbling toward the lanterns or would alight in their hands. Sometimes, afterward, they walked the shore, and Pavo would show them strange creatures with blurring mouths like wheels, or point to the vast, distant beds of the tideflowers that rose at night to the changes of the tide; silver, crimson, or glowing, their fronds waving through the dark like the beckoning palm trees of islands from storybook seas.

One guestless night, when they were walking north away from the lights of the town, and Pavo was filling a silver bag for an aquarium she was ostensibly making for Jalila, but in reality for herself, the horizon suddenly cracked and rumbled. Instinctively by now, Jalila glanced overhead, expect-

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ing clouds to be covering the coastal haze of stars. But the air was still and clear; the hot dark edge of that blue flame. Across the sea, the rumble and crackle was continuing, accompanied by a glowing pillar of smoke that slowly tottered over the horizon. The night pulsed and flickered. There was a breath of impossibly hot salt air. The pillar, a wobbly finger with a flame-tipped nail, continued climbing skyward. A few geelies rose and fell, clacking and cawing, on the far rocks; black shapes in the darkness.

"It's the start of the Season of Rockets," Lya said. "I wonder who'll be coming. . . ?"

2.

By now, Jalila had acquired many of her own acquaintances and friends. Young people were relatively scarce amid the long-lived human Habarans, and those who dwelt around Al Janb were continually drawn together and then repulsed from each other like spinning magnets. The elderly mahwagis, who had outlived the need for wives and the company of a haramlek and lived alone, were often more fun, and more reliably eccentric. It was a relief to visit their houses and escape the pettinesses and sexual jealousies that were starting to infect the other girls near to Jalila's own age. She regarded Kalal similarly—as an escape—and she relished helping him with his boat, and enjoyed their journeys out across the bay, where the wind finally tipped almost cool over the edge of the mountains and lapped the sweat from their faces.

Kalal took Jalila out to see the rocketport one still, hot afternoon. It lay just over the horizon, and was the longest journey they had undertaken. The sails filled with the wind, and the ocean grew almost black, yet somehow transparent, as they hurried over it. Looking down, Jalila believed that she could glimpse the white sliding shapes of the great sea-leviathans who had once dwelt, if local legend was to be believed, in the ruined rock palaces of the qasrs, which she had passed on her journey down from Tabuthal. Growing tired of sunlight, they had swarmed back to the sea that had birthed them, throwing away their jewels and riches, which bubbled below the surface, then rose again under Habara's twin moons to become the beds of tideflowers. She had gotten that part of the story from Kalal. Unlike most people who lived on the coast, Kalal was interested in Jalila's life in the starry darkness of Tabuthal, and repaid her with his own tales of the ocean.

The boat ploughed on, rising, frothing. Blissfully, it was almost cold. Just how far out at sea was this rocketport? Jalila had watched some of the arrivals and departures from the quays at Al Janb, but those journeys took place in sleek sail-less craft with silver doors that looked, as they turned out from the harbor and rose out on stilts from the water, as if they could travel half-way up to the stars on their own. Kalal was squatting at the prow, beyond that ramshackle hut that Jalila now knew contained the pheromones and grapplers that were needed to ensnare the tideflowers that this craft had been built to harvest. The boat bore no name on the prow, yet Kalal had many names for it, which he would occasionally mention without explaining. If there was one thing that was different about Kalal, Jalila had decided, it was this absence of proper talk or explanation. It put many people off, but she had found that most things became apparent if you just hung around him and didn't ask direct questions.

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People generally pitied Kalal, or stared at him as Jalila still stared at the aliens, or asked him questions that he wouldn't answer with anything other than a shrug. Now that she knew him better, Jalila was starting to understand just how much he hated such treatment—almost as much, in fact, as he hated being thought of as ordinary. I am a *man,* you know, he'd still remark sometimes—whenever he felt that Jalila was forgetting. Jalila had never yet risked pointing out that he was in fact a *boy*. Kalal could be prickly and sensitive if you treated him as if things didn't matter. It was hard to tell, really, just how much of how he acted was due to his odd sexual identity, and how much was his personality.

To add to his freakishness, Kalal lived alone with another male—in fact, the only other male in Al Janb—at the far end of the shore cottages, in a birthing relationship that made Kalal term him his *father*. His name was Ibra, and he looked much more like the males of Jalila's dreamtent stories. He was taller than almost anyone, and wore a black beard and long colorful robes or strode about bare-chested, and always talked in a thunderously deep voice, as if he were addressing a crowd through a megaphone. Ibra laughed a lot and flashed his teeth through that hairy mask, and clapped people on the back when he asked them how they were, and then stood away and seemed to lose interest before they had answered. He whistled and sang loudly and waved to passers-by while he worked at repairing the feluccas for his living. Ibra had come to this planet when Kalal was a baby, under circumstances that remained perennially vague. He treated Jalila with the same loud and grinning friendship with which he treated everyone, and which seemed like a wall. He was at least as alien as the tube-like creatures who had arrived from the stars with this new Season of Rockets, which had had one of the larger buildings in Al Janb encased in transparent plastics and flooded in a freezing grey goo so they could live in it. Ibra had come around to their haramlek once, on the strength of one of Ananke's *pop in* evening invitations. Jalila, who was then nurturing the idea that no intelligence could exist without the desire to acknowledge some higher deity, found her propositions and examples drowned out in a flurry of counter-questions and assertions and odd bits of information that she half-suspected that Ibra, as he drank surprising amounts of virtually undiluted zibib and freckled aniseed spit at her, was making up on the spot. Afterward, as they walked the shore, he drew her apart and laid a heavy hand on her shoulder and confided in his rambling growl how much he'd enjoyed *fencing* with her. Jalila knew what fencing was, but she didn't see what it had to do with talking. She wasn't even sure if she liked Ibra. She certainly didn't pretend to understand him.

The sails thrummed and crackled as they headed toward the spaceport. Kalal was absorbed, staring ahead from the prow, the water splashing reflections across his lithe brown body. Jalila had almost grown used to the way he looked. After all, they were both slightly freakish: she, because she came from the mountains; he, because of his sex. And they both liked their own company, and could accept each other into it without distraction during these long periods of silence. One never asked the other what they were thinking. Neither really cared, and they cherished that privacy.

"Look—" Kalal scuttled to the rudder. Jalila hauled back the jib. In wind-crackling silence, they and their nameless and many-named boat tacked toward the spaceport.

The spaceport was almost like the mountains: when you were close up, it

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was too big be seen properly. Yet, for all its size, the place was a disappointment; empty and messy, like a huge version of the docks of Al Janb, similarly reeking of oil and refuse, and essentially serving a similar function. The spaceships themselves—if indeed the vast cistern-like objects they saw forever in the distance as they furled the sails and rowed along the maze of oily canals were spaceships—were only a small part of this huge floating complex of islands. Much more of it was taken up by looming berths for the tugs and tankers that placidly chugged from icy pole to equator across the watery expanses of Habara, taking or delivering the supplies that the settlements deemed necessary for civilized life, or collecting the returning fallen bulk cargoes. The tankers were rust-streaked beasts, so huge that they hardly seemed to grow as you approached them, humming and eerily deserted, yet devoid of any apparent intelligence of their own. They didn't glimpse a single alien at the spaceport. They didn't even see a human being.

The journey there, Jalila decided as they finally got the sails up again, had been far more enjoyable and exciting than actually arriving. Heading back toward the sun-pink coastal mountains, which almost felt like home to her now, she was filled with an odd longing that only diminished when she began to make out the lighted dusky buildings of Al Janb. Was this homesickness, she wondered? Or something else?

This was the time of Ḥabara's long summer. This was the Season of Rockets. When she mentioned their trip, Jalila was severely warned by Pavo of the consequences of approaching the spaceport during periods of possible launch, but it went no further than that. Each night now, and deep into the morning, the rockets rumbled at the horizon and climbed upward on those grumpy pillars, bringing to the shore a faint whiff of sulphur and roses, adding to the thunderous heat. And outside at night, if you looked up, you could sometimes see the blazing comet-trails of the returning capsules, which would crash somewhere in the distant seas.

The beds of tideflowers were growing bigger as well. If you climbed up the sides of the mountains before the morning heat flattened everything, you could look down on those huge, brilliant, and ever-changing carpets, where every pattern and swirl seemed gorgeous and unique. At night, in her dreamtent, Jalila sometimes imagined that she was floating up on them, just as in the oldest of the old stories. She was sailing over a different landscape on a magic carpet, with the cool night desert rising and falling beneath her like a soft sea. She saw distant palaces, and clusters of palms around small and tranquil lakes that flashed the silver of a single moon. And then yet more of this infinite sahara, airy and frosty, flowed through curves and undulations, and grew vast and pinkish in her dreams. Those curves, as she flew over them and began to touch herself, resolved into thighs and breasts. The winds stirring the peaks of the dunes resolved in shuddering breaths.

This was the time of Habara's long summer. This was the Season of Rockets.

Robin, Jalila's hayawan, had by now, under Pavo's attentions, fully recovered from the change to her environment. The rust had gone from her flanks, the melds with her thinly grey-furred flesh were bloodless and neat. She looked thinner and lighter. She even smelled different. Like the other hayawans, Robin was frisky and bright and brown-eyed now, and didn't

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seem to mind the heat, or even Jalila's forgetful neglect of her. Down on the coast, hayawans were regarded as expensive, uncomfortable, and unreliable, and Jalila and her mothers took a pride in riding across the beach into Al Janb on their huge, flat-footed, and loping mounts, enjoying the stares and the whispers, and the whispering space that opened around them as they hobbled the hayawans in a square. Kalal, typically, was one of the few coastal people who expressed an interest in trying to ride one of them, and Jalila was glad to teach him, showing him the clicks and calls and nudges, the way you took the undulations of the creature's back as you might the ups and downs of the sea, and when not to walk around their front and rear ends. After her experiences on his boat, the initial rope burns, the cracks on the head and the heaving sickness, she enjoyed the reversal of situations.

There was a Tabuthal saying about falling off a hayawan ninety-nine times before you learnt to ride, which Kalal disproved by falling off far into triple figures. Jalila chose Lya's mount Abu for him to ride, because she was the biggest, the most intelligent, and generally the most placid of the beasts unless she felt that something was threatening her, and because Lya, more conscious of looks and protocol down here than the other mothers, rarely rode her. Domestic animals, Jalila had noticed, often took oddly to Kalal when they first saw and scented him, but he had learned the ways of getting around them, and developed a bond and understanding with Abu even while she was still trying to bite his legs. Jalila had made a good choice of riding partners. Both of them, hayawan and human, while proud and aloof, were essentially playful, and never shirked a challenge. While all hayawans had been female throughout all recorded history, Jalila wondered if there wasn't a little of the male still embedded in Abu's imperious downward glance.

Now that summer was here, and the afternoons had vanished into the sun's blank blaze, the best time to go riding was the early morning. North, beyond Al Janb, there were shores and there were saltbeds and there were meadows, there were fences to be leapt, and barking feral dogs as male as Kalal to be taunted, but south, there were rocks and forests, there were tracks that led nowhere, and there were headlands and cliffs that you saw once and could never find again. South, mostly, was the way that they rode.

"What happens if we keep riding?"

They were taking their breath on a flatrock shore where a stream, from which they had all drunk, shone in pools on its way to the ocean. The hayawans had squatted down now in the shadows of the cliff and were nodding sleepily, one nictitating membrane after another slipping over their eyes. As soon as they had gotten here and dismounted, Kalal had walked straight down, arms outstretched, into the tideflower-bobbing ocean. Jalila had followed, whooping, feeling tendrils and petals bumping into her. It was like walking through floral soup. Kalal had sunk to his shoulders and started swimming, which was something Jalila still couldn't quite manage. He splashed around her, taunting, sending up sheets of colored light. They'd stripped from their clothes as they clambered out, and laid them on the hot rocks, where they now steamed like fresh bread.

"This whole continent's like a huge island," Jalila said in delayed answer to Kalal's question. "We'd come back to where we started."

Kalal shook his head. "Oh, you can never do that. . . ."

"Where would we be, then?"

"Somewhere slightly different. The tideflowers would have changed, and

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we wouldn't be us, either." Kalal wet his finger, and wrote something in naskhi script on the hot, flat stone between them. Jalila thought she recognized the words of a poet, but the beginning had dissolved into the hot air before she could make proper sense of it. Funny, but at home with her mothers, and with their guests, and even with many of the people of her own age, such statements as they had just made would have been the beginning of a long debate. With Kalal, they just seemed to hang there. Kalal, he moved, he passed on. Nothing quite seemed to stick. There was something, somewhere, Jalila thought, lost and empty about him.

The way he was sitting, she could see most of his genitals, which looked quite jaunty in their little nest of hair; like a small animal. She'd almost gotten as used to the sight of them as she had to the other peculiarities of Kalal's features. Scratching her nose, picking off some of the petals that still clung to her skin like wet confetti, she felt no particular curiosity. Much more than Kalal's funny body, Jalila was conscious of her own—especially her growing breasts, which were still somewhat uneven. Would they ever come out right, she wondered, or would she forever be some unlovely oddity, just as Kalal seemingly was? Better not to think of such things. Better to just enjoy the feel the sun baking her shoulders, loosening the curls of her hair.

"Should we turn back?" Kalal asked eventually. "It's getting hotter. . . ."

"Why bother with that—if we carry on, we'll get back to where we started."

Kalal stood up. "Do you want to bet?"

So they rode on, more slowly, uphill through the uncharted forest, where the urrearth trees tangled with the blue fronds of Habara fungus, and the birds were still, and the crackle of the dry undergrowth was the only sound in the air. Eventually, ducking boughs, then walking, dreamily lost and almost ready to turn back, they came to a path, and remounted. The trees fell away, and they found that they were on a clifftop, far, far higher above the winking sea than they could possibly have imagined. Midday heat clapped around them. Ahead, where the cliff stuck out over the ocean like a cupped hand, shimmering and yet solid, was one of the ruined castles or geological features that the sea-leviathans had supposedly deserted before the arrival of people on this planet—a qasr. They rode slowly toward it, their hayawans' feet thocking in the dust. It looked like a fairy place. Part natural, but roofed and buttressed, with grey-black gables and huge and intricate windows, that flashed with the colors of the sea. Kalal gestured for silence, dismounted from Abu, led his mount back into the shadowed arms of the forest, and flicked the switch in her back that hobbled her.

"You *know* where this is?"

Kalal beckoned.

Jalila, who knew him better than to ask questions, followed.

Close to, much of the qasr seemed to be made of a quartz-speckled version of the same fused stone from which Jalila's haramlek was constructed. But some other bits of it appeared to be natural effusions of the rock. There was a big arched door of sun-bleached and iron-studded oak, reached by a path across the narrowing cliff, but Kalal steered Jalila to the side, and then up and around a bare angle of hot stone that seemed ready at any moment to tilt them down into the distant sea. But the way never quite gave out; there was always another handhold. From the confident manner in which he moved up this near-cliff face, then scrambled across the blistering black

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tiles of the rooftop beyond, and dropped down into the sudden cool of a narrow passageway, Jalila guessed that Kalal had been to this qasr before. At first, there was little sense of trespass. The place seemed old and empty—a little-visited monument. The ceilings were stained. The corridors were swept with the litter of winter leaves. Here and there along the walls, there were friezes, and long strings of a script which made as little sense to Jalila, in their age and dimness, as that which Kalal had written on the hot rocks.

Then Kalal gestured for Jalila to stop, and she clustered beside him, and they looked down through the intricate stone lattice of a mashrabiya into sunlight. It was plain from the balcony drop beneath them that they were still high up in this qasr. Below, in the central courtyard, somehow shocking after this emptiness, a fountain played in a garden, and water lapped from its lip and ran in steel fingers toward cloistered shadows.

"Someone *lives* here?"

Kalal mouthed the word *tariqua.* Somehow, Jalila instantly understood. It all made sense, in this Season of Rockets, even the dim scenes and hieroglyphs carved in the honeyed stones of this fairy castle. Tariquas were merely human, after all, and the spaceport was nearby; they had to live somewhere. Jalila glanced down at her scuffed sandals, suddenly conscious that she hadn't taken them off—but by then it was too late, and below them and through the mashrabiya a figure had detached herself from the shadows. The tariqua was tall and thin, and black and bent as a burnt-out matchstick. She walked with a cane. Jalila didn't know what she'd expected—she'd grown older since her first encounter with Kalal, and no longer imagined that she knew about things just because she'd learnt of them in her dreamtent. But still, this tariqua seemed a long way from someone who piloted the impossible distances between the stars, as she moved and clicked slowly around that courtyard fountain, and far older and frailer than anyone Jalila had ever seen. She tended a bush of blue flowers, she touched the fountain's bubbling stone lip. Her head was ebony bald. Her fingers were charcoal. Her eyes were as white and seemingly blind as the flecks of quartz in the fused stone of this building. Once, though, she seemed to look up toward them. Jalila went cold. Surely it wasn't possible that she could *see* them?—and in any event, there was something about the motion of looking up which seemed habitual. As if, like touching the lip of the fountain, and tending that bush, the tariqua always looked up at this moment of the day at that particular point in the stone walls that rose above her.

Jalila followed Kalal further along the corridors, and down stairways and across drops of beautifully clear glass, that hung on nothing far above the prismatic sea. Another glimpse of the tariqua, who was still slowly moving, her neck stretching like an old tortoise as she bent to sniff a flower. In this part of the qasr, there were more definite signs of habitation. Scattered cards and books. A moth-eaten tapestry that billowed from a windowless arch overlooking the sea. Empty coat hangers piled like the bones of insects. An active but clearly little-used chemical toilet. Now that the initial sense of surprise had gone, there was something funny about this mixture of the extraordinary and the everyday. Here, there was a kitchen, and a half-chewed lump of aish on a plate smeared with seeds. To imagine, that you could both travel between the stars *and* eat bread and tomatoes! Both Kalal and Jalila were red-faced and chuffing now from suppressed hilarity. Down now at the level of the cloisters, hunched in the shade, they studied the tariqua's stooping back. She really did look like a scrawny tortoise, yanked out of its shell,

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moving between these bushes. Any moment now, you expected her to start chomping on the leaves. She moved more by touch than by sight. Amid the intricate colors of this courtyard, and the flashing glass windchimes that tinkled in the far archways, as she fumbled sightlessly but occasionally glanced at things with those odd, white eyes, it seemed yet more likely that she was blind, or at least terribly near-sighted. Slowly, Jalila's hilarity receded, and she began to feel sorry for this old creature who had been aged and withered and wrecked by the strange process of travel between the stars. *The Pain of Distance*—now, where had that phrase come from?

Kalal was still puffing his cheeks. His eyes were watering as he ground his fist against his mouth and silently thumped the nearest pillar in agonized hilarity. Then he let out a nasal grunt, which Jalila was sure that the tariqua must have heard. But her stance didn't alter. It wasn't so much as if she hadn't noticed them, but that she already *knew* that someone was there. There was a sadness and resignation about her movements, the tap of her cane. . . . But Kalal had recovered his equilibrium, and Jalila watched his fingers snake out and enclose a flake of broken paving. Another moment, and it spun out into the sunlit courtyard in an arc so perfect that there was never any doubt that it was going to strike the tariqua smack between her bird-like shoulders. Which it did—but by then they were running, and the tariqua was straightening herself up with that same slow resignation. Just before they bundled themselves up the stairway, Jalila glanced back, and felt a hot bar of light from one of the qasr's high upper windows stream across her face. The tariqua was looking straight toward her with those blind white eyes. Then Kalal grabbed her hand. Once again, she was running.

Jalila was cross with herself, and cross with Kalal. It wasn't *like* her, a voice like a mingled chorus of her three mothers would say, to taunt some poor old mahwagi, even if that mahwagi happened also to be an aged tariqua. But Jalila was young, and life was busy. The voice soon faded. In any case, there was the coming moulid to prepare for.

The arrangement of festivals, locally, and on Habara as a whole, was always difficult. Habara's astronomical year was so long that it made no sense to fix the traditional cycle of moulids by it, but at the same time, no one felt comfortable celebrating the same saint or eid in conflicting seasons. Fasting, after all, properly belonged to winter, and no one could quite face their obligations toward the Almighty with quite the same sense of surrender and equanimity in the middle of spring. People's memories faded, as well, as to how one *did* a particular saint in autumn, or revered a certain enlightenment in blasting heat that you had previously celebrated by throwing snowballs. Added to this were the logistical problems of catering for the needs of a small and scattered population across a large planet. There were travelling players, fairs, wandering sufis and priests, but they plainly couldn't be everywhere at once. The end result was that each moulid was fixed locally on Habara, according to a shifting timetable, and after much discussion and many meetings, and rarely happened twice at exactly the same time, or else occurred simultaneously in different places. Lya threw herself into these discussions with the enthusiasm of one who had long been missing such complexities in the lonelier life up on Tabuthal. For the Moulid of First Habitation—which commemorated the time when the Blessed Joanna had arrived on Habara at a site that several different towns claimed, and cast the first urrearth seeds, and lived for five long Habaran years on nothing

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but tideflowers and starlight, and rode the sea-leviathans across the oceans as if they were hayawans as she waited for her lover Pia—Lya was the leading light in the local organizations at Al Janb, and the rest of her haramlek were expected to follow suit.

The whole of Al Janb was to be transformed for a day and a night. Jalila helped with the hammering and weaving, and tuning Pavo's crystals and plants, which would supposedly transform the serraplate road between their haramlek and the town into a glittering tunnel. More in the forefront of Jalila's mind were those colored silks that came and went at a particular stall in the markets, and which she was sure would look perfect on her. Between the planning and the worries about this or that turning into a disaster, she worked carefully on each of her three mothers in turn; a nudge here, a suggestion there. Turning their thoughts toward accepting this extravagance was a delicate matter, like training a new hayawan to bear the saddle. Of course, there were wild resistances and buckings, but you were patient, you were stronger. You knew what you wanted. You kept to your subject. You returned and returned and returned to it.

On the day when Ananke finally relented, a worrying wind had struck up, pushing at the soft, half-formed growths that now straggled through the normal weeds along the road into Al Janb like silvered mucus. Pavo was fretting about her creations. Lya's life was one long meeting. Even Ananke was anxious as they walked into Al Janb, where faulty fresh projections flickered across the buildings and squares like an incipient headache as the sky greyed. Jalila, urging her birthmother on as she paused frustratingly, was sure that the market wouldn't be there, or that if it was, the stall that sold the windsilks was sure to have sold out—or, even then, that the particular ones she'd set her mind on would have gone. . . .

But it was all there. In fact, a whole new supply of windsilks, even more marvelous and colorful, had been imported for this moulid. They blew and lifted like colored smoke. Jalila caught and admired them.

"I think this might be you. . . ."

Jalila turned at the voice. It was Nayra, a girl about a standard year and a half older than her, whose mothers were amongst the richest and most powerful in Al Janb. Nayra herself was both beautiful and intelligent; witty, and sometimes devastatingly cruel. She was generally at the center of things, surrounded by a bickering and admiring crowd of seemingly lesser mortals, which sometimes included Jalila. But today she was alone.

"You see, Jalila. That crimson. With your hair, your eyes . . ."

She held the windsilk across Jalila's face like a yashmak. It danced around her eyes. It blurred over her shoulders. Jalila would have thought the color too bold. But Nayra's gaze, which flickered without ever quite leaving Jalila's, her smoothing hands, told Jalila that it was right for her far better than any mirror could have. And then there was blue—that flame color of the summer night. There were silver clasps, too, to hold these windsilks, which Jalila had never noticed on sale before. The stallkeeper, sensing a desire to purchase that went beyond normal bargaining, drew out more surprises from a chest. *Feel! They can only be made in one place, on one planet, in one season. Look! The grubs, they only hatch when they hear the song of a particular bird, which sings only once in its life before it gives up its spirit to the Almighty. . . .* And so on. Ananke, seeing that Jalila had found a more interested and willing helper, palmed her far more cash than she'd promised, and left her with a smile and an oddly sad backward glance.

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Jalila spend the rest of that grey and windy afternoon with Nayra, choosing clothes and ornaments for the moulid. Bangles for their wrists and ankles. Perhaps—no? yes?—even a small tiara. Bolts of cloth the color of today's sky bound across her hips to offset the windsilk's beauty. A jewel still filled with the sapphire light of a distant sun to twinkle at her belly. Nayra, with her dark blonde hair, her light brown eyes, her fine strong hands, which were pale pink beneath the fingernails like the inside of a shell, she hardly needed anything to augment her obvious beauty. But Jalila knew from her endless studies of herself in her dreamtent mirror that *she* needed to be more careful; the wrong angle, the wrong light, an incipient spot, and whatever effect she was striving for could be so easily ruined. Yet she'd never really cared as much about such things as she did on that windy afternoon, moving through stalls and shops amid the scent of patchouli. To be so much the focus of her own and someone else's attention! Nayra's hands, smoothing across her back and shoulders, lifting her hair, cool sweat at her shoulders, the cool slide and rattle of her bangles as she raised her arms. . . .

"We could be creatures from a story, Jalila. Let's imagine I'm Scheherazade." A toss of that lovely hair. Liquid gold. Nayra's seashell fingers, stirring. "You can be her sister, Dinarzade. . . ."

Jalila nodded enthusiastically, although Dinarzade had been an unspectacular creature as far as she remembered the tale; there only so that she might waken Scheherazade in the Sultana's chamber before the first cock crow of morning. But her limbs, her throat, felt strange and soft and heavy. She reminded herself, as she dressed and undressed, of the doll Tabatha she'd once so treasured up on Tabuthal, and had found again recently, and thought for some odd reason of burying. . . .

The lifting, the pulling, Nayra's appraising hands and glance and eyes. This unresisting heaviness. Jalila returned home to her haramlek dazed and drained and happy, and severely out of credit.

That night, there was another visitor for dinner. She must have taken some sort of carriage to get there, but she came toward their veranda as if she'd walked the entire distance. Jalila, whose head was filled with many things, was putting out the bowls when she heard the murmur of footsteps. The sound was so slow that eventually she noticed it consciously, looked up, and saw a thin, dark figure coming up the sandy path between Pavo's swaying and newly sculpted bushes. One arm leaned on a cane, and the other strained seekingly forward. In shock, Jalila dropped the bowl she was holding. It seemed to roll around and around on the table forever, slipping playfully out of reach of her fingers before spinning off the edge and shattering into several thousand white pieces.

"Oh dear," the tariqua said, finally climbing the steps beside the windy trellis, her cane tap-tapping. "Perhaps you'd better go and tell one of your mothers, Jalila."

Jalila felt breathless. All through that evening, the tariqua's trachoman white eyes, the scarred and tarry driftwood of her face, seemed to be studying her. Even apart from that odd business of her knowing her name, which she supposed could be explained, Jalila was more and more certain that the tariqua knew that it was she and Kalal who had spied on her and thrown stones at her on that hot day in the qasr. As if that mattered. But somehow, it *did*, more than it should have done. Amid all this confused thinking, and the silky memories of her afternoon with Nayra, Jalila scarcely noticed the

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conversation. The weather remained gusty, spinning the lanterns, playing shapes with the shadows, making the tapestries breathe. The tariqua's voice was as thin as her frame. It carried on the spinning air like the croak of an insect.

"Perhaps we could walk on the beach, Jalila?"

"What?" She jerked as if she'd been abruptly awakened. Her mothers were already clearing things away, and casting odd glances at her. The voice had whispered inside her head, and the tariqua was sitting there, her burnt and splintery arm outstretched, in the hope, Jalila supposed, that she would be helped up from the table. The creature's robe had fallen back. Her arm looked like a picture Jalila had once seen of a dried cadaver. With an effort, nearly knocking over another bowl, Jalila moved around the billowing table. With an even bigger effort, she placed her own hand into that of the tariqua. She'd expected it to feel leathery, which it did. But it was also hot beyond fever. Terribly, the fingers closed around hers. There was a pause. Then the tariqua got up with surprising swiftness, and reached around for her cane, still holding Jalila's hand, but without having placed any weight on it. *She could have done all that on her own, the old witch,* Jalila thought. *And she can* see, *too—look at the way she's been stuffing herself with kofta all evening, reaching over for figs. . . .*

"What do you know of the stars, Jalila?" the tariqua asked as they walked beside the beach. Pavo's creations along the road behind them still looked stark and strange and half-formed as they swayed in the wind, like the wavering silver limbs of an upturned insect. The waves came and went, strewing tideflowers far up the strand. Like the tongue of a snake, the tariqua's cane darted ahead of her.

Jalila shrugged. There were these Gateways, she had always known that. There were these Gateways, and they were the only proper path between the stars, because no one could endure the eons of time that crossing even the tiniest fragment of the Ten Thousand and One Worlds would entail by the ordinary means of traveling from *there* to *here.*

"Not, of course," the tariqua was saying, "that people don't do such things. There are tales, there are always tales, of ghost-ships of sufis drifting for tens of centuries through the black and black. . . . But the wealth, the contact, the *community,* flows through the Gateways. The Almighty herself provided the means to make them in the Days of Creation, when everything that was and will ever be spilled out into a void so empty that it did not even exist as an emptiness. In those first moments, as warring elements collided, boundaries formed, dimensions were made and disappeared without ever quite dissolving, like the salt tidemarks on those rocks. . . . " As they walked, the tariqua waved her cane. ". . . which the sun and the eons can never quite bake away. These boundaries are called cosmic strings, Jalila, and they have no end. They must form either minute loops, or they must stretch from one end of this universe to the other, and then turn back again, and turn and turn without end."

Jalila glanced at the brooch the tariqua was wearing, which was of a worm consuming its tail. She knew that the physical distances between the stars were vast, but the tariqua somehow made the distances that she traversed to avoid that journey seem even vaster. . . .

"You must understand," the tariqua said, "that we tariquas pass through something worse than nothing to get from one side to the other of a Gateway."

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Jalila nodded. She was young, and *nothing* didn't sound especially frightening. Still, she sensed that there were the answers to mysteries in this near-blind gaze and whispering voice that she would never get from her dreamtent or her mothers. "But, *hanim,* what could be worse," she asked dutifully, although she still couldn't think of the tariqua in terms of a name, and thus simply addressed her with the short honorific, "than sheer emptiness?"

"Ah, but emptiness is *nothing*. Imagine, Jalila, passing through *everything* instead!" The tariqua chuckled, and gazed up at the sky. "But the stars are beautiful, and so is this night. You come, I hear, from Tabuthal. There, the skies must all have been very different."

Jalila nodded. A brief vision flared over her. The way that up there, on the clearest, coldest nights, you felt as if the stars were all around you. Even now, much though she loved the fetors and astonishments of the coast, she still felt the odd pang of missing something. It was a *feeling* she missed, as much as the place itself, which she guessed would probably seem bleak and lonely if she returned to it now. It was partly to do, she suspected, with that sense that she was loosing her childhood. It was like being on a ship, on Kalal's nameless boat, and watching the land recede, and half of you loving the loss, half of you hating it. A war seemed to be going on inside her between these two warring impulses. . . .

To her surprise, Jalila realized that she wasn't just thinking these thoughts, but speaking them, and that the tariqua, walking at her slow pace, the weight of her head bending her spine, her cane whispering a jagged line in the dust as the black rags of her djibbah flapped around her, was listening. Jalila supposed that she, too, had been young once, although that was hard to imagine. The sea frothed and swished. They were at the point in the road now where, gently buzzing and almost out of sight amid the forest, hidden there as if in shame, the tariqua's caleche lay waiting. It was a small filigree, a thing as old and black and ornate as her brooch. Jalila helped her toward it through the trees. The craft's door creaked open like an iron gate, then shut behind the tariqua. A few crickets sounded through the night's heat. Then, with a soft rush, and a static glow like the charge of windsilk brushing flesh, the caleche rose up through the treetops and wafted away.

The day of the moulid came. It was everything that Jalila expected, although she paid it little attention. The intricate, bowered pathway that Pavo had been working on finally shaped itself to her plans—in fact, it was better than that, and seemed like a beautiful accident. As the skies cleared, the sun shone through prismatic arches. The flowers, which had looked so stunted only the evening before, suddenly unfolded, with petals like beaten brass, and stamens shaped so that the continuing breeze, which Pavo had always claimed to have feared, laughed and whistled and tooted as it passed through them. Walking beneath the archways of flickering shadows, you were assailed by scents and the clashes of small orchestras. But Jalila's ears were blocked, her eyes were sightless. She, after all, was Dinarzade, and Nayra was Scheherazade of the Thousand and One Nights.

Swirling windsilks, her heart hammering, she strode into Al Janb. Everything seemed to be different today. There were too many sounds and colors. People tried to dance with her, or sell her things. Some of the aliens seemed to have dressed themselves as humans. Some of the humans were most def-

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initely dressed as aliens. Her feet were already blistered and delicate from her new crimson slippers. And there was Nayra, dressed in a silvery serwal and blouse of such devastating simplicity that Jalila felt her heart kick and pause in its beating. Nayra was surrounded by a small storm of her usual admirers. Her eyes took in Jalila as she stood at their edge, then beckoned her to join them. The idea of Dinarzade and Scheherazade, which Jalila had thought was to be their secret, was now shared with everyone. The other girls laughed and clustered around, admiring, joking, touching and stroking bits of her as if she was a hayawan. *You of all people, Jalila! And such jewels, such silks* . . . Jalila stood half-frozen, her heart still kicking. *So, so marvelous! And not at all dowdy.* . . . She could have lived many a long and happy life without such compliments.

Thus the day continued. All of them in a crowd, and Jalila feeling both over-dressed and exposed, with these stirring, whispering windsilks that covered and yet mostly seemed to reveal her body. She felt like a child in a ribboned parade, and when one of the old mahwagis even came up and pressed a sticky lump of basbousa into her hand, it was the final indignity. She trudged off alone, and found Kalal and his father Ibra managing a seafront stall beside the swaying masts of the bigger trawlers, around which there was a fair level of purchase and interest. Ibra was enjoying himself, roaring out enticements and laughter in his big, belling voice. At last, they'd gotten around to harvesting some of the tideflowers for which their nameless boat had been designed, and they were selling every sort here, salt-fresh from the ocean.

"Try this one. . . . " Kalal drew Jalila away to the edge of the harbor, where the oiled water flashed below. He had just one tideflower in his hand. It was deep-banded the same crimson and blue as her windsilks. The interior was like the eye of an anemone.

Jalila was flattered. But she hesitated. "I'm not sure about wearing something dead." In any case, she knew she already looked ridiculous. That this would be more of the same.

"It isn't dead, it's as alive as you are." Kalal held it closer, against Jalila's shoulder, toward the top of her breast, smoothing out the windsilks in a way that briefly reminded her of Nayra. "And isn't this material the dead tissue of some creature or other. . . ?" Still, his hands were smoothing. Jalila thought again of Nayra. Being dressed like a doll. Her nipples started to rise. "And if we take it back to the tideflower beds tomorrow morning, place it down there carefully, it'll still survive . . . " The tideflower had stuck itself to her now, anyway, beneath the shoulder, its adhesion passing through the thin windsilks, burning briefly as it bound to her flesh. And it *was* beautiful, even if she wasn't, and it would have been churlish to refuse. Jalila placed her finger into the tideflower's center, and felt a soft suction, like the mouth of a baby. Smiling, thanking Kalal, feeling somehow better and more determined, she walked away.

The day went on. The night came. Fireworks crackled and rumpled, rippling down the slopes of the mountains. The whole of the center of Al Janb was transformed unrecognizably into the set of a play. Young Joanna herself walked the vast avenues of Ghezirah, the island city that lies at the center of all the Ten Thousand and One Worlds, and which grows in much the same way as Pavo's crystal scaffoldings, but on an inconceivable scale, filled with azure skies, glinting in the dark heavens like a vast diamond. The Blessed Joanna, she was supposedly thinking of a planet that had come to

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her in a vision as she wandered beside Ghezirah's palaces; it was a place of fine seas, lost giants, and mysterious natural castles, although Jalila, as she followed in the buffeting, cheering procession, and glanced around at the scale of the projections that briefly covered Al Janb's ordinary buildings, wondered why, even if this version of Ghezirah was fake and thin, Joanna would ever have wanted to leave *that* city to come to a place such as this.

There were more fireworks. As they rattled, a deeper sound swept over them in a moan from the sea, and everyone looked up as sunglow poured through the gaudy images of Ghezirah that still clad Al Janb's buildings. Not one rocket, or two, but three, were all climbing up from the spaceport simultaneously, the vast white plumes of their energies fanning out across half the sky to form a billowy *fleur de lys*. At last, as she craned her neck and watched the last of those blazing tails diminish, Jalila felt exulted by this moulid. In the main square, the play continued. When she found a place on a bench and began to watch the more intimate parts of the drama unfold, as Joanna's lover Pia pleaded with her to remain amid the cerulean towers of Ghezirah, a figure moved to sit beside her. To Jalila's astonishment, it was Nayra.

"That's a lovely flower. I've been meaning to ask you all day . . . " Her fingers moved across Jalila's shoulder. There was a tug at her skin as she touched the petals.

"I got it from Kalal."

"Oh . . . " Nayra sought the right word. "*Him*. Can I smell it. . . ?" She was already bending down, her face close to Jalila's breast, the golden fall of her hair brushing her forearm, enclosing her in the sweet, slightly vanilla scent of her body. "That's nice. It smells like the sea—on a clear day, when you climb up and look down at it from the mountains. . . . "

The play continued. Would Joanna really go to this planet, which kept appearing to her in these visions? Jalila didn't know. She didn't care. Nayra's hand slipped into her own and lay there upon her thigh with a weight and presence that seemed far heavier than the entire universe. She felt like that doll again. Her breath was pulling, dragging. The play continued, and then, somewhere, somehow, it came to an end. Jalila felt an aching sadness. She'd have been happy for Joanna to continue her will-I-won't-I agonizing and prayers throughout all of human history, just so that she and Nayra could continue to sit together like this, hand in hand, thigh to thigh, on this hard bench.

The projections flickered and faded. She stood up in wordless disappointment. The whole square suddenly looked like a wastetip, and she felt crumpled and used-up in these sweaty and ridiculous clothes. It was hardly worth looking back toward Nayra to say goodbye. She would, Jalila was sure, have already vanished to rejoin those clucking, chattering friends who surrounded her like a wall.

"Wait!" A hand on her arm. That same vanilla scent. "I've heard that your mother Pavo's displays along the south road are something quite fabulous. . . . " For once, Nayra's golden gaze as Jalila looked back at her was almost coy, nearly averted. "I was rather hoping you might show me. . . . "

The two of them. Walking hand in hand, just like all lovers throughout history. Like Pia and Joanna. Like Romana and Juliet. Like Isabel and Genya. Ghosts of smoke from the rocket plumes that had buttressed the sky hung around them, and the world seemed half-dissolved in the scent of sulphur and roses. An old woman they passed, who was sweeping up discarded

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kebab sticks and wrappers, made a sign as they passed, and gave them a weary, sad-happy smile. Jalila wasn't sure what had happened to her slippers, but they and her feet both seemed to have become weightless. If it hadn't been for the soft sway and pull of Nayra's arm, Jalila wouldn't even have been sure that she was moving. *People's feet really* don't *touch the ground when they are in love!* Here was something else that her dreamtent and her mothers hadn't told her.

Pavo's confections of plant and crystal looked marvelous in the hazed and doubled silver shadows of the rising moons. Jalila and Nayra wandered amid them, and the rest of the world felt withdrawn and empty. A breeze was still playing over the rocks and the waves, but the fluting sound had changed. It was one soft pitch, rising, falling. They kissed. Jalila closed her eyes—she couldn't help it—and trembled. Then they held both hands together and stared at each other, unflinching. Nayra's bare arms in the moonslight, the curve inside her elbow and the blue trace of a vein: Jalila had never seen anything as beautiful, here in this magical place.

The stables, where the hayawans were breathing. Jalila spoke to Robin, to Abu. The beasts were sleepy. Their flesh felt cold, their plates were warm, and Nayra seemed a little afraid. There, in the sighing darkness, the clean scent of feed and straw was overlaid with the heat of the hayawans' bodies and their dung. The place was no longer a ramshackle tent, but solid and dark, another of Pavo's creations; the stony catacombs of ages. Jalila led Nayra through it, her shoulders brushing pillars, her heart pounding, her slippered feet whispering through spills of straw. To the far corner, where the fine new white bedding lay like depths of cloud. They threw themselves onto it, half-expecting to fall through. But they were floating in straggles of windsilk, held in tangles of their own laughter and limbs.

"Remember." Nayra's palm on Jalila's right breast, scrolled like an old print in the geometric moonlight that fell from Walah, and then through the arched stone grid of a murqana that lay above their heads. "I'm Scheherazade. You're Dinarzade, my sister . . . " The pebble of Jalila's nipple rising through the windsilk. "That old, old story, Jalila. Can you remember how it went. . . ?"

In the tide of yore and in the time of long gone before, there was a Queen of all the Queens of the Banu Sasan in the far islands of India and China, a Lady of armies and guards and servants and dependants. . . .

Again, they kissed.

Handsome gifts, such as horses with saddles of gem-encrusted gold; mamelukes, or white slaves; beautiful handmaids, high-breasted virgins, and splendid stuffs and costly. . . .

Nayra's hand moved from Jalila's breast to encircle the tideflower. She gave it a tug, pulled harder. Something held, gave, held, hurt, then gave entirely. The windsilks poured back. A small dark bead of blood welled at the curve between Jalila's breast and shoulder. Nayra licked it away.

In one house was a girl weeping for the loss of her sister. In another, perhaps a mother trembling for the fate of her child; and instead of the blessings that had formerly been heaped on the Sultana's head, the air was now full of curses. . . .

Jalila was rising, floating, as Nayra's mouth traveled downward to suckle at her breast.

Now the Wazir had two daughters, Scheherazade and Dinarzade, of whom the elder had perused the books, annals, and legends of preceding queens

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and empresses, and the stories, examples, and instances of bygone things. Scheherazade had read the works of the poets and she knew them by heart. She had studied philosophy, the sciences, the arts, and all accomplishments. And Scheherazade was pleasant and polite, wise and witty. Scheherazade, she was beautiful and well bred. . . .

Flying far over frost-glittering saharas, beneath the twin moons, soaring through the clouds. The falling, rising dunes. The minarets and domes of distant cities. The cries and shuddering sighs of the beloved. Patterned moonlight falling through the murqana in a white and dark tapestry across the curves and hollows of Nayra's belly.

Alekum as-salal wa rahmatu allahi wa barakatuh. . . .

Upon you, the peace and the mercy of God and all these blessings.

Amen.

There was no cock-crow when Jalila startled awake. But Walah had vanished, and so had Nayra, and the light of the morning sun came splintering down through the murqana's hot blue lattice. Sheltering her face with her hands, Jalila looked down at herself, and smiled. The jewel in her belly was all that was left of her costume. She smelled faintly of vanilla, and much of Nayra, and nothing about her flesh seemed quite her own. Moving through the dazzling drizzle, she gathered up the windsilks and other scraps of clothing that had settled into the fleece bedding. She found one of Nayra's earrings, which was twisted to right angles at the post, and had to smile again. And here was that tideflower, tossed upturned like an old cup into the corner. She touched the tiny scab on her shoulder, then lifted the flower up and inhaled, but caught on her palms only the scents of Nayra. She closed her eyes, feeling the diamond speckles of heat and cold across her body like the ripples of the sea.

The hayawans barely stirred as she moved out through their stables. Only Robin regarded her, and then incuriously, as she paused to touch the hard grey melds of her flank that she had pressed against the bars of her enclosure. One eye, grey as rocket smoke, opened, then returned to its saharas of dreams. The hayawans, Jalila supposed for the first time, had their own passions, and these were not to be shared with some odd two-legged creatures of another race and planet.

The morning was still clinging to its freshness, and the road, as she crossed it, was barely warm beneath her feet. Wind-towered Al Janb and the haramlek behind her looked deserted. Even the limbs of the mountains seemed curled in sleepy haze. On this day after the moulid, no one but the geelies was yet stirring. Cawing, they rose and settled in flapping red flocks from the beds of the tideflowers as Jalila scrunched across the hard stones of the beach. Her feet encountered the cool, slick water. She continued walking, wading, until the sea tickled her waist and what remained of the windsilks had spread about in spills of dye. From her cupped hands, she released the tideflower, and watched it float away. She splashed her face. She sunk down to her shoulders as the windsilks dissolved from her, and looked down between her breasts at the glowing jewel that was still stuck in her belly, and plucked it out, and watched it sink; the sea-lantern of a ship, drowning.

Walking back up the beach, wringing the wet from her hair, Jalila noticed a rich green growth standing out amid the sky-filled rockpools and the growths of lichen. Pricked by something resembling Pavo's curiosity, she scrambled over, and crouched to examine it as the gathering heat of the sun

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dried her back. She recognized this spot—albeit dimly—from the angle of a band of quartz that glittered and bled blue oxides. This was where she had coughed up her breathmoss in that early Season of Soft Rains. And here it still was, changed but unmistakable—and growing. A small patch here, several larger patches there. Tiny filaments of green, a minute forest, raising its boughs and branches to the sun.

She walked back up toward her haramlek, humming.

3.

The sky was no longer blue. It was no longer white. It had turned to mercury. The rockets rose and rose in dry crackles of summer lightening. The tube-like aliens fled, leaving their strange house of goo-filled windows and pipes still clicking and humming until something burst and the whole structure deflated, and the mess of it leaked across the nearby streets. There were warnings of poisonings and strange epidemics. There were cloggings and stenches of the drains.

Jalila showed the breathmoss to her mothers, who were all intrigued and delighted, although Pavo had of course noticed and categorized the growth long before, while Ananke had to touch the stuff, and left a small brown mark there like the tips of her three fingers, which dried and turned golden over the days that followed. But in this hot season, these evenings when the sun seemed as if it would never vanish, the breathmoss proved surprisingly hardy. . . .

After that night of the moulid, Jalila spent several happy days absorbed and alone, turning and smoothing the memory of her love-making with Nayra. Wandering above and beneath the unthinking routines of everyday life, she was like a fine craftsman, spinning silver, shaping sandalwood. The dimples of Nayra's back. Sweat glinting in the checkered moonlight. That sweet vein in the crook of her beloved's arm, and the pulse of the blood that had risen from it to the drumbeats of ecstasy. The memory seemed entirely enough to Jalila. She was barely living in the present day. When, perhaps six days after the end of the moulid, Nayra turned up at their doorstep with the ends of her hair chewed wet and her eyes red-rimmed, Jalila had been almost surprised to see her, and then to notice the differences between the real Nayra and the Scheherazade of her memories. Nayra smelled of tears and dust as they embraced; like someone who had arrived from a long, long journey.

"Why didn't you *call* me? I've been waiting, waiting. . . ."

Jalila kissed her hair. Her hand traveled beneath a summer shawl to caress Nayra's back, which felt damp and gritty. She had no idea how to answer her questions. They walked out together that afternoon in the shade of the woods behind the haramlek. The trees had changed in this long, hot season, departing from their urrearth habits to coat their leaves in a waxy substance that smelled medicinal. The shadows of their boughs were chalk-marks and charcoal. All was silent. The urrearth birds had retreated to their summer hibernations until the mists of autumn came to rouse them again. Climbing a scree of stones, they found clusters of them at the back of a cave; feathery bundles amid the dripping rock, seemingly without eyes or beak.

As they sat at the mouth of that cave, looking down across the heat-trem-

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bling bay, sucking the ice and eating the dates that Ananke had insisted they bring with them, Nayra had seemed like a different person than the one Jalila had thought she had known before the day of the moulid. Nayra, too, was human, and not the goddess she had seemed. She had her doubts and worries. She, too, thought that the girls who surrounded her were mostly crass and stupid. She didn't even believe in her own obvious beauty. She cried a little again, and Jalila hugged her. The hug became a kiss. Soon, dusty and greedy, they were tumbling amid the hot rocks. That evening, back at the haramlek, Nayra was welcomed for dinner by Jalila's mothers with mint tea and the best china. She was invited to bathe. Jalila sat beside her as they ate figs fresh from distant Ras and the year's second crop of oranges. She felt happy. At last, life seemed simple. Nayra was now officially her lover, and this love would form the pattern of her days.

Jalila's life now seemed complete; she believed that she was an adult, and that she talked and spoke and loved and worshipped in an adult way. She still rode out sometimes with Kalal on Robin and Abu, she still laughed or stole things or played games, but she was conscious now that these activities were the sweetmeats of life, pleasing but unnutritous, and the real glories and surprises lay with being with Nayra, and with her mothers, and the life of the haramlek that the two young women talked of founding together one day.

Nayra's mothers lived on the far side of Al Janb, in a fine tall clifftop palace that was one of the oldest in the town, clad in white stone and filled with intricate courtyards, and a final beautiful tajo that looked down from gardens of tarragon across the whole bay. Jalila greatly enjoyed exploring this haramlek, deciphering the peeling scripts that wound along the cool vaults, and enjoying the company of Nayra's mothers who, in their wealth and grace and wisdom, often made her own mothers seem like the awkward and recent provincial arrivals that they plainly were. At home, in her own haramlek, the conversations and ideas seemed stale. An awful dream came to Jalila one night. She was her old doll Tabatha, and she really was being buried. The ground she lay in was moist and dank, as if it was still the Season of Soft Rains, and the faces of everyone she knew were clustered around the hole above her, muttering and sighing as her mouth and eyes were inexorably filled with soil.

"Tell me what it was like, when you first fell in love."

Jalila had chosen Pavo to ask this question of. Ananke would probably just hug her, while Lya would talk and talk until there was nothing to say.

"I don't know. Falling in love is like coming home. You can never quite do it for the first time."

"But in the stories—"

"—The stories are always written *afterward,* Jalila."

They were walking the luminous shore. It was near midnight, which was now by far the best time of the night or day. But what Pavo had just said sounded wrong; perhaps she hadn't been the right choice of mother to speak to, after all. Jalila was sure she'd loved Nayra since that day before the moulid of Joanna, although it was true she loved her now in a different way.

"You still don't think we really will form a haramlek together, do you?"

"I think that it's too early to say."

"You were the last of our three, weren't you? Lya and Ananke were already together."

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"It was what drew me to them. They seemed so happy and complete. It was also what frightened me and nearly sent me away."

"But you stayed together, and then there was . . . " This was the part that Jalila still found hardest to acknowledge; the idea that her mothers had a physical, sexual relationship. Sometimes, deep at night, from someone else's dreamtent, she had heard muffled sighs, the wet slap of flesh. Just like the hayawans, she supposed, there were things about other people's lives that you could never fully understand, no matter how well you thought you knew them.

She chose a different tack. "So why did you choose to have me?"

"Because we wanted to fill the world with something that had never ever existed before. Because we felt selfish. Because we wanted to give ourselves away."

"Ananke, she actually gave birth to me, didn't she?"

"Down here at Al Janb, they'd say we were primitive and mad. Perhaps that was how we wanted to be. But all the machines at the clinics do is try to recreate the conditions of a real human womb—the voices, the movements, the sound of breathing. . . . Without first hearing that Song of Life, no human can ever be happy, so what better way could there be than to hear it naturally?"

A flash of that dream-image of herself being buried. "But the birth itself—"

"—I think that was something we all underestimated." The tone of Pavo's voice told Jalila that this was not a subject to be explored on the grounds of mere curiosity.

The tideflower beds had solidified. You could walk across them as if they were dry land. Kalal, after several postponements and broken promises, took Jalila and Nayra out one night to demonstrate.

Smoking lanterns at the prow and stern of his boat. The water slipping warm as blood through Jalila's trailing fingers. Al Janb receding beneath the hot thighs of the mountains. Kalal at the prow. Nayra sitting beside her, her arm around her shoulder, hand straying across her breast until Jalila shrugged it away because the heat of their two bodies was oppressive.

"This season'll end soon," Nayra said. "You've never known the winter here, have you?"

"I was *born* in the winter. Nothing here could be as cold as the lightest spring morning in the mountains of Tabuthal."

"Ah, the *mountains*. You must show me sometime. We should travel there together. . . . "

Jalila nodded, trying hard to picture that journey. She'd attempted to interest Nayra in riding a hayawan, but she grew frightened even in the presence of the beasts. In so many ways, in fact, Nayra surprised Jalila with her timidity. Jalila, in these moments of doubt, and as she lay alone in her dreamtent and wondered, would list to herself Nayra's many assets: her lithe and willing body; the beautiful haramlek of her beautiful mothers; the fact that so many of the other girls now envied and admired her. There were so many things that were good about Nayra.

Kalal, now that his boat had been set on course for the further tidebeds, came to sit with them, his face sweated lantern-red. He and Nayra shared many memories, and now, as the sails pushed on from the hot air off the mountains, they vied to tell Jalila of the surprises and delights of winters in Al Janb. The fogs when you couldn't see your hand. The intoxicating blue

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berries that appeared in special hollows through the crust of the snow. The special saint's days. . . . If Jalila hadn't known better, she'd have said that Nayra and Kalal were fighting over something more important.

The beds of tideflowers were vast, luminous, heavy-scented. Red-black clusters of geelies rose and fell here and there in the moonslight. Walking these gaudy carpets was a most strange sensation. The dense interlaces of leaves felt like rubber matting, but sank and bobbed. Jalila and Nayra lit more lanterns and dotted them around a field of huge primrose and orange petals. They sang and staggered and rolled and fell over. Nayra had brought a pipe of kif resin, and the sensation of smoking that and trying to dance was hilarious. Kalal declined, pleading that he had to control the boat on the way back, and picked his way out of sight, disturbing flocks of geelies.

And so the two girls danced as the twin moons rose. Nayra, twirling silks, her hair fanning, was graceful as Jalila still staggered amid the lapping flowers. As she lifted her arms and rose on tiptoe, bracelets glittering, she had never looked more desirable. Somewhat drunkenly—and slightly reluctantly, because Kalal might return at any moment—Jalila moved forward to embrace her. It was good to hold Nayra, and her mouth tasted like the tideflowers and sucked needily at her own. In fact, the moments of their love had never been sweeter and slower than they were on that night, although, even as Jalila marveled at the shape of Nayra's breasts and listened to the changed song of her breathing, she felt herself chilling, receding, drawing back, not just from Nayra's physical presence, but from this small bay beside the small town on the single continent beside Habara's great and lonely ocean. Jalila felt infinitely sorry for Nayra as she brought her to her little ecstasies and they kissed and rolled across the beds of flowers. She felt sorry for Nayra because she was beautiful, and sorry for her because of all her accomplishments, and sorry for her because she would always be happy here amid the slow seasons of this little planet.

Jalila felt sorry for herself as well; sorry because she had thought that she had known love, and because she knew now that it had only been a pretty illusion.

There was a shifting wind, dry and abrasive, briefly to be welcomed, until it became something to curse and cover your face and close your shutters against.

Of Jalila's mothers, only Lya seemed at all disappointed by her break from Nayra, no doubt because she had fostered hopes of their union forming a powerful bond between their haramleks, and even she did her best not to show it. Of the outside world, the other young women of Al Janb all professed total disbelief—*why if it had been me, I'd never have* . . . But soon, they were cherishing the new hope that it might indeed *be* them. Nayra, to her credit, maintained an extraordinary dignity in the face of the fact that she, of all people, had finally been rejected. She dressed in plain clothes. She spoke and ate simply. Of course, she looked more devastatingly beautiful than ever, and everyone's eyes were reddened by air-borne grit in any case, so it was impossible to tell how much she had really been crying. Now, as the buildings of Al Janb creaked and the breakers rolled and the wind howled through the teeth of the mountains, Jalila saw the gaudy, seeking and competing creatures who so often surrounded Nayra quite differently. Nayra was not, had never been, in control of them. She was more like the

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bloody carcass over which, flashing their teeth, their eyes, stretching their limbs, they endlessly fought. Often, riven by a sadness far deeper than she had ever experienced, missing something she couldn't explain, wandering alone or lying in her dreamtent, Jalila nearly went back to Nayra. . . . But she never did.

This was the Season of Winds, and Jalila was heartily sick of herself and Al Janb, and the girls and the mahwagis and the mothers, and of this changing, buffeting banshee weather that seemed to play with her moods. Sometimes now, the skies were entirely beautiful, strung by the curling multicolored banners of sand that the winds had lifted from distant corners of the continent. There was crimson and there was sapphire. The distant saharas of Jalila's dreams had come to haunt her. They fell—as the trees tore and the paint stripped from the shutters and what remained of Pavo's arches collapsed—in an irritating grit that worked its way into all the crevices of your body and every weave of your clothes.

The tariqua had spoken of the pain of *nothing,* and then of the pain of *everything*. At the time, Jalila had understood neither, but now, she felt that she understood the pain of nothing all too well. The product of the combined genes of her three mothers; loving Ananke, ever-curious Pavo, proud and talkative Lya, she had always felt glad to recognize these characteristics mingled in herself, but now she wondered if these traits hadn't cancelled each other out. She was a null-point, a zero, clumsy and destructive and unloving. She was Jalila, and she walked alone and uncaring through this Season of Winds.

One morning, the weather was especially harsh. Jalila was alone in the haramlek, although she cared little where she or anywhere else was. A shutter must have come loose somewhere. That often happened now. It had been banging and hammering so long that it began to irritate even her. She climbed stairs and slammed doors over jamming drifts of mica. She flapped back irritably at flapping curtains. Still, the banging went on. Yet all the windows and doors were now secure. She was sure of it. Unless. . . .

Someone was at the front door. She could see a swirling globular head through the greenish glass mullion. Even though they could surely see her as well, the banging went on. Jalila wondered if she wanted it to be Nayra; after all, this was how she had come to her after the moulid; a sweet and needy human being to drag her out from her dreams. But it was only Kalal. As the door shoved Jalila back, she tried not to look disappointed.

"You can't do this with your life!"

"Do what?"

"This—*nothing*. And then not answering the fucking door. . . ." Kalal prowled the hallway as the door banged back and forth and tapestries flailed, looking for clues as if he was a detective. "Let's go out."

Even in this weather, Jalila supposed that she owed it to Robin. Then Kalal had wanted to go north, and she insisted on going south, and was not in any mood for arguing. It was an odd journey, so unlike the ones they'd undertaken in the summer. They wrapped their heads and faces in flapping howlis, and tried to ride mostly in the forest, but the trees whipped and flapped and the raw air still abraded their faces.

They took lunch down by a flatrock shore, in what amounted to shelter, although there was still little enough of it as the wind eddied about them. This could have been the same spot where they had stopped in summer, but

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it was hard to tell; the light was so changed, the sky so bruised. Kalal seemed changed, too. His face beneath his howli seemed older, as he tried to eat their aish before the sand-laden air got to it, and his chin looked prickled and abraded. Jalila supposed that this was the same facial growth that his father Ibra was so fond of sporting. She also supposed he must choose to shave his off in the way that some women on some decadent planets were said to shave their legs and armpits.

"Come a bit closer—" she half-shouted, working her way back into the lee of the bigger rock beside which she was sitting to make room for him. "I want you to tell me what you know about love, Kalal."

Kalal hunched beside her. For a while, he just continued tearing and chewing bits of aish, with his body pressed against hers as the winds boiled around them, the warmth of their flesh almost meeting. And Jalila wondered if men and women, when their lives and needs had been more closely intertwined, had perhaps known the answer to her question. What *was* love, after all? It would have been nice to think that, in those dim times of myth, men and women had whispered the answer to that question to each other. . . .

She thought then that Kalal hadn't properly heard her. He was telling her about his father, and a planet he barely remembered, but on which he was born. The sky there had been fractaled gold and turquoise—colors so strange and bright that they came as a delight and a shock each morning. It was a place of many islands, and one great city. His father had been a fisherman and boat-repairer of sorts there as well, although the boats had been much grander than anything you ever saw at Al Janb, and the fish had lived not as single organisms, but as complex shoals that were caught not for their meat, but for their joint minds. Ibra had been approached by a woman from off-world, who had wanted a ship on which she could sail alone around the whole lonely band of the northern oceans. She had told him that she was sick of human company. The planning and the making of the craft was a joy for Ibra, because such a lonely journey had been one that he had long dreamed of making, if ever he'd had the time and money. The ship was his finest-ever creation, and it turned out, as they worked on it, that neither he nor the woman were quite as sick of human company as they had imagined. They fell in love as the keel and the spars grew in the city dockyards and the ship's mind was nurtured, and as they did so, they slowly re-learned the expressions of sexual need between the male and female.

"You mean he *raped* her?"

Kalal tossed his last nub of bread toward the waves. "I mean that they *made love*."

After the usual negotiations and contracts, and after the necessary insertions of the appropriate cells, Ibra and this woman (whom Kalal didn't name in his story, any more than he named the world) set sail together, fully intending to conceive a child in the fabled way of old.

"Which was *you?*"

Kalal scowled. It was impossible to ask him even simple questions on this subject without making him look annoyed. "Of *course* it was! How many of me do you think there are?" Then he lapsed into silence. The sands swirled in colored helixes before them.

"That woman—your birthmother. What happened to her?"

"She wanted to take me away, of course—to some haramlek on another world, just as she'd been planning all along. My father was just a toy to her.

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As soon as their ship returned, she started making plans, issuing contracts. There was a long legal dispute with my father. I was placed in a birthsac, in stasis."

"And your father won?"

Kalal scowled. "He took me here, anyway. Which is winning enough."

There were many other questions about this story that Jalila wanted to ask Kalal, if she hadn't already pressed too far. What, after all, did this tale of dispute and deception have to do with love? And were Kalal and Ibra really fugitives? It would explain quite a lot. Once more, in that familiar welling, she felt sorry for him. Men were such strange, sad creatures; forever fighting, angry, lost. . . .

"*I'm* glad you're here anyway," she said. Then, on impulse, one of those careless things you do, she took that rough and ugly chin in her hand, turned his face toward hers and kissed him lightly on the lips.

"What was that for?"

"*El-hamdu-l-Illah.* That was for thanks."

They plodded further on their hayawans. They came eventually to a cliff-edge so high that the sea and sky above and beneath vanished. Jalila already knew what they would see as they made their way along it, but still it was a shock; that qasr, thrust into these teeming ribbons of sand. The winds whooped and howled, and the hayawans raised their heads and howled back at it. In this grinding atmosphere, Jalila could see how the qasrs had been carved over long years from pure natural rock. They dismounted, and struggled bent-backed across the narrowing track toward the qasr's studded door. Jalila raised her fist and beat on it.

She glanced back at Kalal, but his face was entirely hidden beneath his hood. Had they always intended to come here? But they had traveled too far to do otherwise now; Robin and Abu were tired and near-blinded; they all needed rest and shelter. She beat on the door again, but the sound was lost in the booming storm. Perhaps the tariqua had left with the last of the Season of Rockets, just as had most of the aliens. Jalila was about to turn away when the door, as if thrown wide by the wind, blasted open. There was no one on the other side, and the hallway beyond was dark as the bottom of a dry well. Robin hoiked her head back and howled and resisted as Jalila hauled her in. Kalal with Abu followed. The door, with a massive drumbeat, hammered itself shut behind them. Of course, it was only some old mechanism of this house, but Jalila felt the hairs on the nape of her neck rise.

They hobbled the hayawans beside the largest of the scalloped arches, and walked on down the passageway beyond. The wind was still with them, and the shapes of the pillars were like the swirling helixes of sand made solid. It was hard to tell what parts of this place had been made by the hands of women and what was entirely natural. If the qasr had seemed deserted in the heat of summer, it was entirely abandoned now. A scatter of glass windchimes, torn apart by the wind. A few broken plates. Some flapping cobwebs of tapestry.

Kalal pulled Jalila's hand.

"Let's go back. . . . "

But there was greater light ahead, the shadows of the speeding sky. Here was the courtyard where they had glimpsed the tariqua. She had plainly gone now—the fountain was dry and clogged, the bushes were bare tangles of wire. They walked out beneath the tiled arches, looking around. The wind

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was like a million voices, rising in ululating chorus. This was a strange and empty place; somehow dangerous. . . . Jalila span around. The tariqua was standing there, her robes flapping. With insect fingers, she beckoned.

"Are you leaving?" Jalila asked. "I mean, this place. . . ."

The tariqua had led them into the shelter of a tall, wind-echoing chamber set with blue and white tiles. There were a few rugs and cushions scattered on the floor, but still the sense of abandonment remained. As if, Jalila thought, as the tariqua folded herself on the floor and gestured that they join her, this was her last retreat.

"No, Jalila. I won't be leaving Habara. *Itfaddal.* . . . Do sit down."

They stepped from their sandals and obeyed. Jalila couldn't quite remember now whether Kalal had encountered the tariqua on her visit to their haramlek, although it seemed plain from his stares at her, and the way her grey-white gaze returned them, that they knew of each other in some way. Coffee was brewing in the corner, over a tiny blue spirit flame, which, as it fluttered in the many drafts, would have taken hours to heat anything. Yet the spout of the brass pot was steaming. And there were dates, too, and nuts and seeds. The tariqua, apologizing for her inadequacy as a host, nevertheless insisted that they help themselves. And somewhere there was a trough of water, too, for their hayawans, and a basket of acram leaves.

Uneasily, they sipped from their cups, chewed the seeds. Kalal had picked up a chipped lump of old stone and was playing with it nervously. Jalila couldn't quite see what it was.

"So," he said, clearing his throat, "you've been to and from the stars, have you?"

"As have you. Perhaps you could name the planet? It may have been somewhere that we have both visited. . . ."

Kalal swallowed. His lump of old stone clicked the floor. A spindle of wind played chill on Jalila's neck. Then—she didn't know how it began—the tariqua was talking of Ghezirah, the great and fabled city that lay at the center of all the Ten Thousand and One Worlds. No one Jalila had ever met or heard of had ever visited Ghezirah, not even Nayra's mothers—yet this tariqua talked of it as if she knew it well. Before, Jalila had somehow imagined the tariqua trailing from planet to distant planet with dull cargoes of ore and biomass in her ship's holds. To her mind, Ghezirah had always been more than half-mythical—a place from which a dubious historical figure such as the Blessed Joanna might easily emanate, but certainly not a place composed of solid streets upon which the gnarled and bony feet of this old woman might once have walked. . . .

Ghezirah . . . she could see it now in her mind, smell the shadowy lobbies, see the ever-climbing curve of its mezzanines and rooftops vanishing into the impossible greens of the Floating Ocean. But every time Jalila's vision seemed about to solidify, the tariqua said something else that made it tremble and change. And then the tariqua said the strangest thing of all, which was that the City At The End Of All Roads was actually *alive*. Not alive in the meager sense in which every town has a sort of life, but truly living. The city thought. It grew. It responded. There was no central mind or focus to this consciousness, because Ghezirah *itself,* its teeming streets and minarets and rivers and caleches and its many millions of lives, was itself the mind. . . .

Jalila was awestruck, but Kalal seemed unimpressed, and was still playing with that old lump of stone.

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4.

"Jalilaneen. . . ."

The way bondmother Lya said her name made Jalila look up. Somewhere in her throat, a wary nerve started ticking. They took their meals inside now, in the central courtyard of the haramlek, which Pavo had provided with a translucent roofing to let in a little of what light there was in the evenings' skies, and keep out most of the wind. Still, as Jalila took a sip of steaming hibiscus, she was sure that the sand had gotten into something.

"We've been talking. Things have come up—ideas about which we'd like to seek your opinion. . . ."

In other words, Jalila thought, her gaze traveling across her three mothers, you've decided something. And this is how you tell me—by pretending that you're consulting me. It had been the same with leaving Tabuthal. It was always the same. An old ghost of herself got up at that point, threw down her napkin, stalked off up to her room. But the new Jalila remained seated. She even smiled and tried to look encouraging.

"We've seen so little of this world," Lya continued. "All of us, really. And especially since we had you. It's been marvelous. But, of course, it's also been confining. . . . Oh *no*—" Lya waved the idea away quickly, before anyone could even begin to start thinking it. "—we won't be leaving our haramlek and Al Janb. There are many things to do. New bonds and friendships have been made. Ananke and I won't be leaving, anyway. . . . But Pavo . . . " And here Lya, who could never quite stop being the chair of a committee, gave a nod toward her mate. ". . . Pavo here has dec—expressed a *wish*—that she would like to travel."

"Travel?" Jalila leaned forward, her chin resting on her knuckles. "How?"

Pavo gave her plate a half turn. "By boat seems the best way to explore Habara. With such a big ocean. . . . " She turned the plate again, as if to demonstrate.

"And not just a *boat,*" Ananke put in encouragingly. "A brand new *ship*. We're having it built—"

"—But I thought you said you hadn't yet decided?"

"The contract, I think, is still being prepared," Lya explained. "And much of the craft will be to Pavo's own design."

"Will you be building it yourself?"

"Not alone." Pavo gave another of her flustered smiles. "I've asked Ibra to help me. He seems to be the best, the most knowledgeable—"

"—Ibra? Does he have any references?"

"This is *Al Janb,* Jalila," Lya said. "We know and trust people. I'd have thought that, with your friendship with Kalal. . . . "

"This certainly *is* Al Janb. . . . " Jalila sat back. "How can I ever forget it!" All of her mothers' eyes were on her. Then something broke. She got up and stormed off to her room.

The long ride to the tariqua's qasr, the swish of the wind, and banging three times on the old oak door. Then hobbling Robin and hurrying through dusty corridors to that tall tiled chamber, and somehow expecting no one to be there, even though Jalila had now come here several times alone.

But the tariqua was always there. Waiting.

Between them now, there was much to be said.

"This ant, Jalila, which crawls across this sheet of paper from *here* to

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there. She is much like us as we crawl across the surface of this planet. Even if she had the wings some of her kind sprout, just as I have my caleche, it would still be the same." The tiny creature, waving feelers, was plainly lost. A black dot. Jalila understood how it felt. "But say, if we were to fold both sides of the paper together. You see how she moves now. . . ?" The ant, antennae waving, hesitant, at last made the tiny jump. "We can move more quickly from one place to another by not travelling across the distance that separates us from it, but by folding space itself.

"Imagine now, Jalila, that this universe is not one thing alone, one solitary series of *this* following *that,* but an endless branching of potentialities. Such it has been since the Days of Creation, and such it is even now, in the shuffle of that leaf as the wind picks at it, in the rising steam of your coffee. Every moment goes in many ways. Most are poor, half-formed things, the passing thoughts and whims of the Almighty. They hang there and they die, never to be seen again. But others branch as strongly as this path that we find ourselves following. There are universes where you and I have never sat here in this qasr. There are universes where there is no Jalila. . . . Will you get that for me. . . ?"

The tariqua was pointing to an old book in a far corner. Its leather was cracked, the wind lifted its pages. As she took it from her, Jalila felt the hot brush of the old woman's hand.

"So now, you must imagine that there is not just one sheet of a single universe, but many, as in this book, heaped invisibly above and beside and below the page upon which we find ourselves crawling. In fact . . . " The ant recoiled briefly, sensing the strange heat of the tariqua's fingers, then settled on the open pages. "You must imagine shelf after shelf, floor upon floor of books, the aisles of an infinite library. And if we are to fold this one page, you see, we or the ant never quite knows what lies on the other side of it. And there may be a tear in that next page as well. It may even be that another version of ourselves has already torn it."

Despite its worn state, the book looked potentially valuable, hand-written in a beautiful flowing script. Jalila had to wince when the tariqua's fingers ripped through them. But the ant had vanished now. She was somewhere between the book's pages. . . .

"That, Jalila, is the Pain of Distance—the sense of every potentiality. So that womankind may pass over the spaces between the stars, every tariqua must experience it." The wind gave an extra lunge, flipping the book shut. Jalila reached forward, but the tariqua, quick for once, was ahead of her. Instead of opening the book to release the ant, she weighed it down with the same chipped old stone with which Kalal had played on his solitary visit to this qasr.

"Now, perhaps, my Jalila, you begin to understand?"

The stone was old, chipped, grey-green. It was inscribed, and had been carved with the closed wings of a beetle. Here was something from a world so impossibly old and distant as to make the book upon which it rested seem fresh and new as an unbudded leaf—a scarab, shaped for the Queens of Egypt.

"See here, Jalila. See how it grows. The breathmoss?"

This was the beginning of the Season of Autumns. The trees were beautiful; the forests were on fire with their leaves. Jalila had been walking with Pavo, enjoying the return of the birdsong, and wondering why it was that

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this new season felt sad when everything around her seemed to be changing and growing.

"Look. . . ."

The breathmoss, too, had turned russet-gold. Leaning close to it beneath this tranquil sky, which was composed of a blue so pale it was as if the sea had been caught in reflection inside an upturned white bowl, was like looking into the arms of a miniature forest.

"Do you think it will die?"

Pavo leaned beside her. "Jalila, it should have died long ago. *Inshallah,* it is a small miracle." There were the three dead marks where Ananke had touched it in a Season of Long Ago. "You see how frail it is, and yet . . ."

"At least it won't spread and take over the planet."

"Not for a while, at least."

On another rock lay another small colony. Here, too, oddly enough, there were marks. Five large dead dots, as if made by the outspread of a hand, although the shape of it was too big to have been Ananke's. They walked on. Evening was coming. Their shadows were lengthening. Although the sun was shining and the waves sparkled, Jalila wished that she had put on something warmer than a shawl.

"That tariqua. You seem to enjoy her company. . . ."

Jalila nodded. When she was with the old woman, she felt at last as if she was escaping the confines of Al Janb. It was liberating, after the close life in this town and with her mothers in their haramlek, to know that interstellar space truly existed, and then to feel, as the tariqua spoke of Gateways, momentarily like that ant, infinitely small and yet somehow inching, crawling across the many universes' infinite pages. But how could she express this? Even Pavo wouldn't understand.

"How goes the boat?" she asked instead.

Pavo slipped her arm into to crook of Jalila's and hugged her. "You must come and *see!* I have the plan in my head, but I'd never realized quite how big it would be. And complex. Ibra's full of enthusiasm."

"I can imagine!"

The sea flashed. The two women chuckled.

"The way the ship's designed, Jalila, there's more than enough room for others. I never exactly planned to go alone, but then Lya's Lya. And Ananke's always—"

Jalila gave her mother's arm a squeeze. "I know what you're saying."

"I'd be happy if you came, Jalila. I'd understand if you didn't. This is such a beautiful, wonderful planet. The leviathans—we know so little about them, yet they plainly have intelligence, just as all those old myths say."

"You'll be telling me next about the qasrs. . . ."

"The ones we can see near here are *nothing!* There are islands on the ocean that are entirely made from them. And the wind pours through. They sing endlessly. A different song for every mood and season."

"Moods! If I'd said something like that when you were teaching me of the Pillars of Life, you'd have told me I was being unscientific!"

"Science is *about* wonder, Jalila. I was a poor teacher if I never told you that."

"You did." Jalila turned to kiss Pavo's forehead. "You did. . . ."

Pavo's ship was a fine thing. Between the slipways and the old mooring posts, where the red-flapping geelies quarreled over scraps of dying tide-

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flower, it grew and grew. Golden-hulled. Far sleeker and bigger than even the ferries that had once borne Al Janb's visitors to and from the rocket port, and which now squatted on the shingle nearby, gently rusting. It was the talk of the Season. People came to admire its progress.

As Jalila watched the spars rise over the clustered roofs of the fisherwomen's houses, she was reminded of Kalal's tale of his father and his nameless mother, and that ship that they had made together in the teeming dockyards of that city. Her thoughts blurred. She saw the high balconies of a hotel far bigger than any of Al Janb's inns and boarding houses. She saw a darker, brighter ocean. Strange flesh upon flesh, with the windows open to the oil-and-salt breeze, the white lace curtains rising, falling. . . .

The boat grew, and Jalila visited the tariqua, although back in Al Janb, her thoughts sometimes trailed after Kalal as she wondered how it must be—to be male, like the last dodo, and trapped in some endless state of part-arousal, like a form of nagging worry. Poor Kalal. But his life certainly wasn't lonely. The first time Jalila noticed him at the center of the excited swarm of girls that once again surrounded Nayra, she'd almost thought that she was seeing things. But the gossip was loud and persistent. Kalal and Nayra were *a couple*—the phrase normally followed by a scandalized shriek, a hand-covered mouth. Jalila could only guess what the proud mothers of Nayra's haramlek thought of such a union, but, of course, no one could subscribe to outright prejudice. Kalal was, after all, just another human being. Lightly probing her own mothers' attitudes, she found the usual condescending tolerance. Having sexual relations with a male would be like smoking kif, or drinking alcohol, or any other form of slightly aberrant adolescent behavior; to be tolerated with easy smiles and sympathy, as long as it didn't go on for too long. To be treated, in fact, in much the same manner as her mothers were now treating her regular visits to the tariqua.

Jalila came to understand why people thought of the Season of Autumns as a sad time. The chill nights. The morning fogs that shrouded the bay. The leaves, finally falling, piled into rotting heaps. The tideflower beds, also, were dying as the waves pulled and dismantled what remained of their colors, and they drifted to the shores, the flowers bearing the same stench and texture and color as upturned clay. The geelies were dying as well. In the town, to compensate, there was much bunting and celebration for yet another moulid, but to Jalila the brightness seemed feeble—the flame of a match held against winter's gathering gale. Still, she sometimes wandered the old markets with some of her old curiosity, nostalgically touching the flapping windsilks, studying the faces and nodding at the many she now knew, although her thoughts were often literally light-years away. *The Pain of Distance*; she could feel it. Inwardly, she was thrilled and afraid. Her mothers and everyone else, caught up in the moulid and Pavo's coming departure, imagined from her mood that she had now decided to take that voyage with her. She deceived Kalal in much the same way.

The nights became clearer. Riding back from the qasr one dark evening with the tariqua's slight voice ringing in her ears, the stars seemed to hover closer around her than at any time since she had left Tabuthal. She could feel the night blossoming, its emptiness and the possibilities spinning out to infinity. She felt both like crying, and like whooping for joy. She had dared to ask the tariqua the question she had long been formulating, and the answer, albeit not entirely yes, had not been no. She talked to Robin as they

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bobbed along, and the puny yellow smudge of Al Janb drew slowly closer. You must understand, she told her hayawan, that the core of the Almighty is like the empty place between these stars, around which they all revolve. It is *there,* we know it, but we can never *see* it. . . . She sang songs from the old saharas about the joy of loneliness, and the loneliness of joy. From here, high up on the gradually descending road that wound its way down toward her haramlek, the horizon was still distant enough for her to see the lights of the rocketport. It was like a huge tidebed, holding out as the season changed. And there at the center of it, rising golden, no longer a stumpy silo-shaped object but somehow beautiful, was the last of the year's rockets. It would have to rise from Habara before the coming of the Season of Winters.

Her mothers' anxious faces hurried around her in the lamplight as she led Robin toward the stable.

"Where have you *been,* Jalilaneen?"

"Do you *know* what time it is?"

"We should be in the town *already!*"

For some reason, they were dressed in their best, most formal robes. Their palms were hennaed and scented. They bustled Jalila out of her gritty clothes, practically washed and dressed her, then flapped themselves down the serraplate road into town, where the processions had already started. Still, they were there in plenty of time to witness the blessing of Pavo's ship. It was to be called *Endeavor,* and Pavo and Jalila together smashed the bottle of wine across its prow before it rumbled into the nightblack waters of the harbor with an enormous white splash. Everyone cheered. Pavo hugged Jalila.

There were more bottles of the same frothy wine available at the party afterward. Lya, with her usual thoroughness, had ordered a huge case of the stuff, although many of the guests remembered the Prophet's old injunction and avoided imbibing. Ibra, though, was soon even more full of himself than usual, and went around the big marquee with a bottle in each hand, dancing clumsily with anyone who was foolish enough to come near him. Jalila drank a little of the stuff herself. The taste was sweet, but oddly hot and bitter. She filled up another glass.

"Wondered what you two mariners were going to call that boat. . . ."

It was Kalal. He'd been dancing with many of the girls, and he looked almost as red-faced as his father.

"Bet you don't even know what the first *Endeavor* was."

"You're wrong there," Jalila countered primly, although the simple words almost fell over each other as she tried to say them. "It was the spacecraft of Captain Cook. She was one of urrearth's most famous early explorers."

"I thought you were many things," Kalal countered, angry for no apparent reason. "But I never thought you were *stupid.*"

Jalila watched him walk away. The dance had gathered up its beat. Ibra had retreated to sit, foolishly glum, in a corner, and Nayra had moved to the middle of the floor, her arms raised, bracelets jingling, an opal jewel at her belly, windsilk-draped hips swaying. Jalila watched. Perhaps it was the drink, but for the first time in many a Season, she felt a slight return of that old erotic longing as she watched Nayra swaying. Desire was the strangest of all emotions. It seemed so trivial when you weren't possessed of it, and yet when you were possessed, it was as if all the secrets of the universe were waiting. . . . Nayra was the focus of all attention now as she swayed amid the crowd, her shoulders glistening. She danced before Jalila, and her lan-

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guorous eyes fixed her for a moment before she danced on. Now she was dancing with Kalal, and he was swaying with her, her hands laid upon his shoulders, and everyone was clapping. They made a fine couple. But the music was getting louder, and so were people's voices. Her head was pounding. She left the marquee.

She welcomed the harshness of the night air, the clear presence of the stars. Even the stench of the rotting tideflowers seemed appropriate as she picked her way across the ropes and slipways of the beach. So much had changed since she had first come here—but mostly what had changed had been herself. Here, its shape unmistakable as rising Walah spread her faint blue light across the ocean, was Kalal's boat. She sat down on the gunwale. The cold wind bit into her. She heard the crunch of shingle, and imagined it was someone else who was in need of solitude. But the sound grew closer, and then whoever it was sat down on the boat beside her. She didn't need to look up now. Kalal's smell was always different, and now he was sweating from the dancing.

"I thought you were enjoying yourself," she muttered.

"Oh—I was . . . " The emphasis on the *was* was strong.

They sat there for a long time, in windy, wave-crashing silence. It was almost like being alone. It was like the old days of their being together.

"So you're going, are you?" Kalal asked eventually.

"Oh, yes."

"I'm pleased for you. It's a fine boat, and I like Pavo best of all your mothers. You haven't seemed quite so happy lately here in Al Janb. Spending all that time with that old witch in the qasr."

"She's not a witch. She's a tariqua. It's one of the greatest, oldest callings. Although I'm surprised you've had time to notice what I'm up to, anyway. You and Nayra . . . "

Kalal laughed, and the wind made the sound turn bitter.

"I'm sorry," Jalila continued. "I'm sounding just like those stupid gossips. I know you're not like that. Either of you. And I'm happy for you both. Nayra's sweet and talented and entirely lovely . . . I hope it lasts . . . I hope . . . "

After another long pause, Kalal said, "Seeing as we're apologizing, I'm sorry I got cross with you about the name of that boat you'll be going on—the *Endeavor*. It's a good name."

"Thank you. *El-hamadu-l-illah.*"

"In fact, I could only think of one better one, and I'm glad you and Pavo didn't use it. You know what they say. To have two ships with the same name confuses the spirits of the winds. . . . "

"What are you talking about, Kalal?"

"This boat. You're sitting right on it. I thought you might have noticed."

Jalila glanced down at the prow, which lay before her in the moonlight, pointing toward the silvered waves. From this angle, and in the old naskhi script that Kalal had used, it took her a moment to work out the craft's name. Something turned inside her.

Breathmoss.

In white, moonlit letters.

"I'm sure there are better names for a boat," she said carefully. "Still, I'm flattered."

"Flattered?" Kalal stood up. She couldn't really see his face, but she suddenly knew that she'd once again said the wrong thing. He waved his hands in an odd shrug, and he seemed for a moment almost ready to lean close to

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her—to do something unpredictable and violent—but instead, picking up stones and skimming them hard into the agitated waters, he walked away.

Pavo was right. If not about love—which Jalila knew now that she still waited to experience—then at least about the major decisions of your life. There was never quite a beginning to them, although your mind often sought for such a thing.

When the tariqua's caleche emerged out of the newly teeming rain one dark evening a week or so after the naming of the *Endeavor,* and settled itself before the lights of their haramlek, and the old woman herself emerged, somehow still dry, and splashed across the puddled garden while her three mothers flustered about to find the umbrella they should have thought to look for earlier, Jalila still didn't know what she should be thinking. The four women would, in any case, need to talk alone; Jalila recognized that. For once, after the initial greetings, she was happy to retreat to her dreamtent.

But her mind was still in turmoil. She was suddenly terrified that her mothers would actually agree to this strange proposition, and then that, out of little more than embarrassment and obligation, the rest of her life would be bound to something that the tariqua called the Church of the Gateway. She knew so little. The tariqua talked only in riddles. She could be a fraud, for all Jalila knew—or a witch, just as Kalal insisted. Thoughts swirled about her like the rain. To make the time disappear, she tried searching the knowledge of her dreamtent. Lying there, listening to the rising sound of her mothers' voices, which seemed to be studded endlessly with the syllables of her own name, Jalila let the personalities who had guided her through the many Pillars of Wisdom tell her what they knew about the Church of the Gateway.

She saw the blackness of planetary space, swirled with the mica dots of turning planets. Almost as big as those as she zoomed close to it, yet looking disappointingly like a many-angled version of the rocketport, lay the spacestation, and, within it, the junction that could lead you from *here* to *there* without passing across the distance between. A huge rent in the Book of Life, composed of the trapped energies of those things the tariqua called cosmic strings, although they and the Gateway itself were visible as nothing more than a turning ring near to the center of the vast spacestation, where occasionally, as Jalila watched, crafts of all possible shapes would seem to hang, then vanish. The gap she glimpsed inside seemed no darker than that which hung between the stars behind it, but it somehow hurt to stare at it. This, then, was the core of the mystery; something both plain and extraordinary. We crawl across the surface of this universe like ants, and each of these craft, switching through the Gateway's moment of loss and endless potentiality, is piloted by the will of a tariqua's conscious intelligence, which must glimpse those choices, then somehow emerge sane and entire at the other end of everything. . . .

Jalila's mind returned to the familiar scents and shapes of her dreamtent, and the sounds of the rain. The moment seemed to belong with those of the long-ago Season of Soft Rains. Downstairs, there were no voices. As she climbed out from her dreamtent, warily expecting to find the haramlek leaking and half-finished, Jalila was struck by an idea that the tariqua hadn't quite made plain to her; that a Gateway must push through *time* just as easily as it pushes through every other dimension. . . ! But the rooms of the

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haramlek were finely furnished, and her three mothers and the tariqua were sitting in the rainswept candlelight of the courtyard, waiting.

With any lesser request, Lya always quizzed Jalila before she would even consider granting it. So as Jalila sat before her mothers and tried not to tremble in their presence, she wondered how she could possibly explain her ignorance of this pure, boundless mystery.

But Lya simply asked Jalila if this was what she wanted—to be an acolyte of the Church of the Gateway.

"Yes."

Jalila waited. Then, not even, *are you sure?* They'd trusted her less than this when they'd sent her on errands into Al Janb. . . . It was still raining. The evening was starless and dark. Her three mothers, having hugged her, but saying little else, retreated to their own dreamtents and silences, leaving Jalila to say farewell to the tariqua alone. The heat of the old woman's hand no longer came as a surprise to Jalila as she helped her up from her chair and away from the sheltered courtyard.

"Well," the tariqua croaked, "that didn't seem to go so badly."

"But I know so *little!*" They were standing on the patio at the dripping edge of the night. Wet streamers of wind tugged at them.

"I know you wish I could tell you more, Jalila—but then, would it make any difference?"

Jalila shook her head. "Will you come with me?"

"Habara is where I must stay, Jalila. It is written."

"But I'll be able to return?"

"Of course. But you must remember that you can never return to the place you have left." The tariqua fumbled with her clasp, the one of a worm consuming its tail. "I want you to have this." It was made of black ivory, and felt as hot as the old woman's flesh as Jalila took it. For once, not really caring whether she broke her bones, she gave the small, bird-like woman a hug. She smelled of dust and metal, like an antique box left forgotten on a sunny windowledge. Jalila helped her out down the steps into the rainswept garden.

"I'll come again soon," she said, "to the qasr."

"Of course . . . there are many arrangements." The tariqua opened the dripping filigree door of her caleche and peered at her with those half-blind eyes. Jalila waited. They had stood too long in the rain already.

"Yes?"

"Don't be too hard on Kalal."

Puzzled, Jalila watched the caleche rise and turn away from the lights of the haramlek.

Jalila moved warily through the sharded glass of her own and her mothers' expectations. It was agreed that a message concerning her be sent, endorsed by the full long and ornate formal name of the tariqua, to the body that did indeed call itself the Church of the Gateway. It went by radio pulse to the spacestation in wide solar orbit that received Habara's rockets, and was then passed on inside a vessel from *here* to *there* that was piloted by a tariqua. Not only that, but the message was destined for Ghezirah! Riding Robin up to the cliffs where, in this newly clear autumn air, under grey skies and tearing wet wind, she could finally see the waiting fuselage of that last golden rocket, Jalila felt confused and tiny, huge and mythic. It was agreed though, that for the sake of everyone—and not least Jalila herself,

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should she change her mind—that the word should remain that she was traveling out around the planet with Pavo on board the *Endeavor*. In need of something to do when she wasn't brooding, and waiting for further word from (could it really be?) the sentient city of Ghezirah, Jalila threw herself into the listings and loadings and preparations with convincing enthusiasm.

"The hardest decisions, once made, are often the best ones."

"Compared to what you'll be doing, my little journey seems almost pointless."

"We love you so deeply."

Then the message finally came: an acknowledgement; an acceptance; a few (far too few, it seemed) particulars of the arrangements and permissions necessary for such a journey. All on less than half a sheet of plain two-dimensional printout.

Even Lya had started touching and hugging her at every opportunity.

Jalila ate lunch with Kalal and Nayra. She surprised herself and talked gaily at first of singing islands and sea-leviathans, somehow feeling that she was hiding little from her two best friends but the particular details of the journey she was undertaking. But Jalila was struck by the coldness that seemed to lie between these two supposed lovers. Nayra, perhaps sensing from bitter experience that she was once again about to be rejected, seemed near-tearful behind her dazzling smiles and the flirtatious blonde tossings of her hair, while Kalal seemed . . . Jalila had no idea how he seemed, but she couldn't let it end like this, and concocted some queries about the *Endeavor* so that she could lead him off alone as they left the bar. Nayra, perhaps fearing something else entirely, was reluctant to leave them.

"I wonder what it is that we've both done to her?" Kalal sighed as they watched her give a final sideways wave, pause, and then turn reluctantly down a sidestreet with a most un-Nayran duck of her lovely head.

They walked toward the harbor through a pause in the rain, to where the *Endeavor* was waiting.

"Lovely, isn't she?" Kalal murmured as they stood looking down at the long deck, then up at the high forest of spars. Pavo, who was developing her acquaintance with the ship's mind, gave them a wave from the bubble of the forecastle. "How long do you think your journey will take? You should be back by early spring, I calculate, if you get ahead of the icebergs. . . . "

Jalila fingered the brooch that the tariqua had given her, and which she had taken to wearing at her shoulder in the place where she had once worn the tideflower. It was like black ivory, but set with tiny white specks that loomed at your eyes if you held it close. She had no idea what world it was from, or of the substance of which it was made.

". . . You'll miss the winter here. But perhaps that's no bad thing. It's cold, and there'll be other Seasons on the ocean. And there'll be other winters. Well, to be honest, Jalila, I'd been hoping—"

"—Look!" Jalila interrupted, suddenly sick of the lie she'd been living. "I'm not going."

They turned and were facing each other by the harbor's edge. Kalal's strange face twisted into surprise, and then something like delight. Jalila thought that he was looking more and more like his father. "That's marvelous!" He clasped each of Jalila's arms and squeezed her hard enough to hurt. "It was rubbish, by the way, what I just said about winters here in Al Janb. They're the most magical, wonderful season. We'll have snowball fights together! And when Eid al-Fitr comes . . . "

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His voice trailed off. His hands dropped from her. "What is it, Jalila?"

"I'm not going with Pavo on the *Endeavor,* but I'm going away. I'm going to Ghezirah. I'm going to study under the Church of the Gateway. I'm going to try to become a tariqua."

His face twisted again. "That witch—"

"—don't keep calling her that! You have no idea!"

Kalal balled his fists, and Jalila stumbled back, fearing for a moment that this wild, odd creature might actually be about to strike her. But he turned instead, and ran off from the harbor.

Next morning, to no one's particular surprise, it was once again raining. Jalila felt restless and disturbed after her incomplete exchanges with Kalal. Some time had also passed since the message had been received from Ghezirah, and the few small details it had given of her journey had become vast and complicated and frustrating in their arranging. Despite the weather, she decided to ride out to see the tariqua.

Robin's mood had been almost as odd as her mothers, recently, and she moaned and snickered at Jalila when she entered the stables. Jalila called back to her, and stroked her long nose, trying to ease her agitation. It was only when she went to check the harnesses that she realized that Abu was missing. Lya was in the haramlek, still finishing breakfast. It had to be Kalal who had taken her.

The swirling serraplated road. The black, dripping trees. The agitated ocean. Robin was starting to rust again. She would need more of Pavo's attention. But Pavo would soon be gone too. . . . The whole planet was changing, and Jalila didn't know what to make of anything, least of all what Kalal was up to, although the unasked-for borrowing of a precious mount, even if Abu had been virtually Kalal's all summer, filled her with a foreboding that was an awkward load, not especially heavy, but difficult to carry or put down; awkward and jagged and painful. Twice, now, he had turned from her and walked away with something unsaid. It felt like the start of some prophecy. . . .

The qasr shone jet-black in the teeming rain. The studded door, straining to overcome the swelling damp, burst open more forcefully than usual at Jalila's third knock, and the air inside swirled dark and empty. No sign of Abu in the place beyond the porch where Kalal would probably have hobbled him, although the floor here seemed muddied and damp, and Robin was agitated. Jalila glanced back, but she and her hayawan had already obscured the possible signs of another's presence. Unlike Kalal, who seemed to notice many things, she decided that she made a poor detective.

Cold air stuttered down the passageways. Jalila, chilled and watchful, had grown so used to this qasr's sense of abandonment that it was impossible to tell whether the place was now finally empty. But she feared that it was. Her thoughts and footsteps whispered to her that the tariqua, after ruining her life and playing with her expectations, had simply vanished into a puff of lost potentialities. Already disappointed, angry, she hurried to the high-ceilinged room set with blue and white tiles and found, with no great surprise, that the strewn cushions were cold and damp, the coffee lamp was unlit, and that the book through which that patient ant had crawled was now sprawled in a damp-leafed scatter of torn pages. There was no sign of the scarab. Jalila sat down, and listened to the wind's howl, the rain's ticking, wondering for a long time when it was that she had lost the ability to cry.

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Finally, she stood up and moved toward the courtyard. It was colder today than it had ever been, and the rain had greyed and thickened. It gelled and dripped from the gutters in the form of something she supposed was called *sleet,* and which she decided as it splattered down her neck that she would hate forever. It filled the bowl of the fountain with mucus-like slush, and trickled sluggishly along the lines of the drains. The air was full of weepings and howlings. In the corner of the courtyard, there lay a small black heap.

Sprawled half in, half out of the poor shelter of the arched cloisters, more than ever like a flightless bird, the tariqua lay dead. Her clothes were sodden. All the furnace heat had gone from her body, although, on a day such as this, that would take no more than a matter of moments. Jalila glanced up though the sleet toward the black wet stone of the latticed mashrabiya from which she and Kalal had first spied on the old woman, but she was sure now that she was alone. People shrank incredibly when they were dead—even a figure as frail and old as this creature had been. And yet, Jalila found as she tried to move the tariqua's remains out of the rain, their spiritless bodies grew uncompliant; heavier and stupider than clay. The tariqua's face rolled up toward her. One side was pushed in almost unrecognizably, and she saw that a nearby nest of ants were swarming over it, busily tunneling out the moisture and nutrition, bearing it across the smeared paving as they stored up for the long winter ahead.

There was no sign of the scarab.

5.

This, for Jalila and her mothers, was the Season of Farewells. It was the Season of Departures.

There was a small and pretty onion-domed mausoleum on a headland overlooking Al Janb, and the pastures around it were a popular place for picnics and lovers' trysts in the Season of Summers, although they were scattered with tombstones. It was the ever-reliable Lya who saw to the bathing and shrouding of the tariqua's body, which was something Jalila could not possibly face, and to the sending out though the null-space between the stars of all the necessary messages. Jalila, who had never been witness to the processes of death before, was astonished at the speed with which everything was arranged. As she stood with the other mourners on a day scarfed with cloud, beside the narrow rectangle of earth within which what remained of the tariqua now lay, she could still hear the wind booming over the empty qasr, feel the uncompliant weight of the old woman's body, the chill speckle of sleet on her face.

It seemed as if most of the population of Al Janb had made the journey with the cortege up the narrow road from the town. Hard-handed fisherwomen. Gaudily dressed merchants. Even the few remaining aliens. Nayra was there, too, a beautiful vision of sorrow surrounded by her lesser black acolytes. So was Ibra. So, even, was Kalal. Jalila, who was acknowledged to have known the old woman better than anyone, said a few words that she barely heard herself over the wind. Then a priestess who had flown in specially from Ras pronounced the usual prayers about the soul rising on the arms of Munkar and Nakir, the blue and the black angels. Looking down into the ground, trying hard to think of the Gardens of Delight that the Almighty always promised her stumbling faithful, Jalila could only remem-

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ber that dream of her own burial: the soil pattering on her face, and everyone she knew looking down at her. The tariqua, in one of her many half-finished tales, had once spoken to her of a world upon which no sun had ever shone, but which was nevertheless warm and bounteous from the core of heat beneath its surface, and where the people were all blind, and moved by touch and sound alone; it was a joyous place, and they were forever singing. Perhaps, and despite all the words of the Prophet, Heaven, too, was a place of warmth and darkness.

The ceremony was finished. Everyone moved away, each pausing to toss in a damp clod of earth, but leaving the rest of the job to be completed by a dull-minded robotic creature, which Pavo had had to rescue from the attentions of the younger children, who, all though the long Habaran summer, had ridden around on it. Down at their haramlek, Jalila's mothers had organized a small feast. People wandered the courtyard, and commented admiringly on the many changes and improvements they had made to the place. Amid all this, Ibra seemed subdued—a reluctant presence in his own body—while Kalal was nowhere to be seen at all, although Jalila suspected that, if only for the reasons of penance, he couldn't be far away.

Of course, there had been shock at the news of the tariqua's death, and Lya, who had now become the person to whom the town most often turned to resolve its difficulties, had taken the lead in the inquiries that followed. A committee of wisewomen was organized even more quickly than the funeral, and Jalila had been summoned and interrogated. Waiting outside in the cold hallways of Al Janb's municipal buildings, she'd toyed with the idea of keeping Abu's disappearance and her suspicions of Kalal out of her story, but Lya and the others had already spoken to him, and he'd admitted to what sounded like everything. He'd ridden to the qasr on Abu to remonstrate with the tariqua. He'd been angry, and his mood had been bad. Somehow, but only lightly, he'd pushed the old woman, and she had fallen badly. Then, he panicked. Kalal bore responsibility for his acts, it was true, but it was accepted that the incident was essentially an accident. Jalila, who had imagined many versions of Kalal's confrontation with the tariqua, but not a single one that seemed entirely real, had been surprised at how easily the people of Al Janb were willing to absolve him. She wondered if they would have done so quite so easily if Kalal had not been a freak—a man. And then she also wondered, although no one had said a single word to suggest it, just how much she was to blame for all of this herself.

She left the haramlek from the funeral wake and crossed the road to the beach. Kalal was sitting on the rocks, his back turned to the shore and the mountains. He didn't look around when she approached and sat down beside him. It was the first time since before the tariqua's death that they'd been alone.

"I'll have to leave here," he said, still gazing out toward the clouds that trailed the horizon.

"There's no reason—"

"—no one's asked me and Ibra to *stay*. I think they would, don't you, if anyone had wanted us to? That's the way you women work."

"We're not *you women,* Kalal. We're people."

"So you always say. And all Al Janb's probably terrified about the report they've had to make to that thing you're joining—the Church of the Gateway. Some big, powerful body, and—whoops—we've killed one of your old employees. . . ."

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"Please don't be bitter."

Kalal blinked and said nothing. His cheeks were shining.

"You and Ibra—where will you both go?"

"There are plenty of other towns around this coast. We can use our boat to take us there before the ice sets in. We can't afford to leave the planet. But maybe in the Season of False Springs, when I'm a grown man and we've made some of the proper money we're always talking about making from harvesting the tideflowers—and when word's got around to everyone on this planet of what happened here. Maybe then we'll leave Habara." He shook his head and sniffed. "I don't know why I bother to say *maybe*. . . ."

Jalila watched the waves. She wondered if this was the destiny of all men; to wander forever from place to place, planet to planet, pursued by the knowledge of vague crimes that they hadn't really committed.

"I suppose you want to know what happened?"

Jalila shook her head. "It's in the report, Kalal. I believe what you said."

He wiped his face with his palms, studied their wetness. "I'm not sure I believe it myself, Jalila. The way she was, that day. That old woman—she always seemed to be expecting you, didn't she? And then she seemed to know. I don't understand quite how it happened, and I was angry, I admit. But she almost *lunged* at me. . . . She seemed to want to die. . . ."

"You mustn't blame yourself. *I* brought you to this, Kalal. I never saw . . ." Jalila shook her head. She couldn't say. Not even now. Her eyes felt parched and cold.

"I loved you, Jalila."

The worlds branched in a million different ways. It could all have been different. The tariqua still alive. Jalila and Kalal together, instead of the half-formed thing that the love they had both felt for Nayra had briefly been. They could have taken the *Endeavor* together and sailed this planet's seas; Pavo would probably have let them—but when, but where, but how? None of it seemed real. Perhaps the tariqua was right; there are many worlds, but most of them are poor, half-formed things.

Jalila and Kalal sat there for a while longer. The breathmoss lay not far off, darkening and hardening into a carpet of stiff grey. Neither of them noticed it.

For no other reason than the shift of the tides and the rapidly coming winter, Pavo, Jalila, and Kalal and Ibra all left Al Janb on the same morning. The days before were chaotic in the haramlek. People shouted and looked around for things and grew cross and petty. Jalila was torn between bringing everything and nothing, and after many hours of bag-packing and lip-chewing, decided that it could all be thrown out, and that her time would be better spent down in the stables, with Robin. Abu was there too, of course, and she seemed to sense the imminence of change and departure even more than Jalila's own hayawan. She had become Kalal's mount far more than she had ever been Lya's, and he wouldn't come to say goodbye.

Jalila stroked the warm felt of the creatures' noses. Gazing into Abu's eyes as she gazed back at hers, she remembered their rides out in the heat of summer. Being with Kalal then, although she hadn't even noticed it, had been the closest she had ever come to loving anyone. On the last night before their departure, Ananke cooked one of her most extravagant dinners, and the four women sat around the heaped extravagance of the table that she'd spent all day preparing, each of them wondering what to say, and re-

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gretting how much of these precious last times together they'd wasted. They said a long prayer to the Almighty, and bowed in the direction of Al'Toman. It seemed that, tomorrow, even the two mothers who weren't leaving Al Janb would be setting out on a new and difficult journey.

Then there came the morning, and the weather obliged with chill sunlight and a wind that pushed hard at their cloaks and nudged the *Endeavor* away from the harbor even before her sails were set. They all watched her go, the whole town cheering and waving as Pavo waved back, looking smaller and neater and prettier than ever as she receded. Without ceremony, around the corner from the docks, out of sight and glad of the *Endeavor*'s distraction, Ibra and Kalal were also preparing to leave. At a run, Jalila caught them just as they were starting to shift the hull down the rubbled slipway into the waves. *Breathmoss;* she noticed that Kalal had kept the name, although she and he stood apart on that final beach and talked as two strangers.

She shook hands with Ibra. She kissed Kalal lightly on the cheek by leaning stiffly forward, and felt the roughness of his stubble. Then the craft got stuck on the slipway, and they were all heaving to get her moving the last few meters into the ocean, until, suddenly, she was afloat, and Ibra was raising the sails, and Kalal was at the prow, hidden behind the tarpaulined weight of their belongings. Jalila only glimpsed him once more, and by then *Breathmoss* had turned to meet the stronger currents that swept outside the grey bay. He could have been a figurehead.

Back at the dock, her mothers were pacing, anxious.

"Where have you *been?*"

"Do you *know* what *time* is?"

Jalila let them scald her. She *was* almost late for her own leaving. Although most of the crowds had departed, she'd half expected Nayra to be there. Jalila was momentarily saddened, and then she was glad for her. The silver craft that would take her to the rocketport smelled disappointingly of engine fumes as she clambered into it with the few other women and aliens who were leaving Habara. There was a loud bang as the hatches closed, and then a long wait while nothing seemed to happen, and she could only wave at Lya and Ananke through the thick porthole, smiling and mouthing stupid phrases until her face ached. The ferry bobbed loose, lurched, turned, and angled up. Al Janb was half gone in plumes of white spray already.

Then it came in a huge wave. That feeling of incompleteness, of something vital and unknown left irretrievably behind, which is the beginning of the Pain of Distance that Jalila, as a tariqua, would have to face throughout her long life. A sweat came over her. As she gazed out through the porthole at what little there was to see of Al Janb and the mountains, it slowly resolved itself into one thought. Immense and trivial. Vital and stupid. That scarab. She'd never asked Kalal about it, nor found it at the qasr, and the ancient object turned itself over in her head, sinking, spinning, filling her mind and then dwindling before rising up again as she climbed out, nauseous, from the ferry and crossed the clanging gantries of the spaceport toward the last huge golden craft, which stood steaming in the winter's air. A murder weapon?—but no, Kalal was no murderer. And, in any case, she was a poor detective. And yet . . .

The rockets thrust and rumbled. Pushing back, squeezing her eyeballs. There was no time now to think. Weight on weight, terrible seconds piled on her. Her blood seemed to leave her face. She was a clay-corpse. Vital ele-

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ments of her senses departed. Then, there was a huge wash of silence. Jalila turned to look through the porthole beside her, and there it was. Mostly blue, and entirely beautiful: Habara, her birth planet. Jalila's hands rose up without her willing, and her fingers squealed as she touched the glass and tried to trace the shape of the greenish-brown coastline, the rising brown and white of the mountains of that huge single continent that already seemed so small, but of which she knew so little. Jewels seemed to be hanging close before her, twinkling and floating in and out of focus like the hazy stars she couldn't yet see. They puzzled her for a long time, did these jewels, and they were evasive as fish as she sought them with her weightlessly clumsy fingers. Then Jalila felt the salt break of moisture against her face, and realized what it was.

At long last, she was crying.

6.

Jalila had long been expecting the message when it finally came. At only one hundred and twenty standard years, Pavo was still relatively young to die, but she had used her life up at a frantic pace, as if she had always known that her time would be limited. Even though the custom for swift funerals remained on Habara, Jalila was able to use her position as a tariqua to ride the Gateways and return for the service. The weather on the planet of her birth was unpredictable as ever, raining one moment and then sunny the next, even as she took the ferry to Al Janb from the rocketport, and hot and cold winds seemed to strike her face as she stood on the dock's edge and looked about for her two remaining mothers. They embraced. They led her to their haramlek, which seemed smaller to Jalila each time she visited it, despite the many additions and extensions and improvements they had made, and far closer to Al Janb than the long walk she remembered once taking on those many errands. She wandered the shore after dinner, and searched the twilight for a particular shape and angle of quartz, and the signs of dark growth. But the heights of the Season of Storms on this coastline were ferocious, and nothing as fragile as breathmoss could have survived. She lay sleepless that night in her old room within her dreamtent, breathing the strong, dense, moist atmosphere with difficulty, listening to the sound of the wind and rain.

She recognized none of the faces but her mothers' of the people who stood around Pavo's grave the following morning. Al Janb had seemed so changeless, yet even Nayra had moved on—and Kalal was far away. Time was relentless. Far more than the wind that came in off the bay, it chilled Jalila to the bone. One mother dead, and her two others looking like the mahwagis she supposed they were becoming. *The Pain of Distance.* More than ever now, and hour by hour and day by day in this life that she had chosen, Jalila knew what the old tariqua had meant. She stepped forward to say a few words. Pavo's life had been beautiful and complete. She had passed on much knowledge about this planet to all womankind, just as she had once passed on her wisdom to Jalila. The people listened respectfully to Jalila, as if she were a priest. When the prayers were finished and the clods of earth had been tossed and the groups began to move back down the hillside, Jalila remained standing by Pavo's grave. What looked like the same old part-metal beast came lumbering up, and began to fill in the rest of the hole, lifting and

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lowering the earth with reverent, childlike care. Just as Jalila had insisted, and despite her mothers' puzzlement, Pavo's grave lay right beside the old tariqua's whom they had buried so long ago. This was a place that she had long avoided, but now that Jalila saw the stone, once raw and brittle, but now smoothed and greyed by rain and wind, she felt none of the expected agony. She traced the complex name, scrolled in naskhi script, which she had once found impossible to remember, but which she had now recited countless times in the ceremonials that the Church of the Gateway demanded of its acolytes. Sometimes, especially in the High Temple at Ghezirah, the damn things could go on for days. Yet not one member of the whole Church had seen fit to come to the simple ceremony of this old woman's burial. It had hurt her, once, to think that no one from offworld had come to her own funeral. But now she understood.

About to walk away, Jalila paused, and peered around the back of the gravestone. In the lee of the wind, a soft green patch of life was thriving. She stooped to examine the growth, which was thick and healthy, forming a patch more than the size of her two outstretched hands in this sheltered place. Breathmoss. It must have been here for a long time. Yet who would have thought to bring it? Only Pavo: only Pavo could possibly have known.

As the gathering of mourners at the haramlek started to peter out, Jalila excused herself and went to Pavo's quarters. Most of the stuff up here was a mystery to her. There were machines and nutrients and potions beyond anything you'd expect to encounter on such an out-of-the way planet. Things were growing. Objects and data needed developing, tending, cataloging, if Pavo's legacy was to be maintained. Jalila would have to speak to her mothers. But, for now, she found what she wanted, which was little more than a glass tube with an open end. She pocketed it, and walked back up over the hill to the cemetery, and said another few prayers, and bent down in the lee of the wind behind the old gravestone beside Pavo's new patch of earth, and managed to remove a small portion of the breathmoss without damaging the rest of it.

That afternoon, she knew that she would have to ride out. The stables seemed virtually unchanged, and Robin was waiting. She even snickered in recognition of Jalila, and didn't try to bite her when she came to introduce the saddle. It had been such a long time that the animal's easy compliance seemed a small miracle. But perhaps this was Pavo again; she could have done something to preserve the recollection of her much-changed mistress in some circuit or synapse of the hayawan's memory. Snuffling tears, feeling sad and exulted, and also somewhat uncomfortable, Jalila headed south on her hayawan along the old serraplate road, up over the cliffs and beneath the arms of the urrearth forest. The trees seemed different; thicker-leafed. And the birdsong cooed slower and deeper than she remembered. Perhaps, here in Habara, this was some Season other than all of those that she remembered. But the qasr reared as always—out there on the cliff face, and plainly deserted. No one came here now, but, like Robin, the door, at three beats of her fists, remembered.

Such neglect. Such decay. It seemed a dark and empty place. Even before Jalila came across the ancient signs of her own future presence—a twisted coathanger, a chipped plate, a few bleached and rotting cushions, some odd and scattered bits of Gateway technology that had passed beyond malfunction and looked like broken shells—she felt lost and afraid. Perhaps this, at last, was the final moment of knowing that she had warned herself she

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might have to face on Habara. The Pain of Distance. But at the same time, she knew that she was safe as she crawled across this particular page of her universe, and that when she did finally take a turn beyond the Gateways through which sanity itself could scarcely follow, it would be of her own volition, and as an impossibly old woman. The tariqua. Tending flowers like an old tortoise thrust out of its shell. Here, on a sunny, distant day. There were worse things. There were always worse things. And life was good. For all of this, pain was the price you paid.

Still, in the courtyard, Jalila felt the cold draft of prescience upon her neck from that lacy mashrabiya where she and Kalal would one day stand. The movement she made as she looked up toward it even reminded her of the old tariqua. Even her eyesight was not as sharp as it had once been. Of course, there were ways around that which could be purchased in the tiered and dizzy markets of Ghezirah, but sometimes it was better to accept a few things as the will of the Almighty. Bowing down, muttering the *shahada,* Jalila laid the breathmoss upon the shaded stone within the cloister. Sheltered here, she imagined that it would thrive. Mounting Robin, riding from the qasr, she paused once to look back. Perhaps her eyesight really was failing her, for she thought she saw the ancient structure shimmer and change. A beautiful green castle hung above the cliffs, coated entirely in breathmoss; a wonder from a far and distant age. She rode on, humming snatches of the old songs she'd once known so well about love and loss between the stars. Back at the haramlek, her mothers were as anxious as ever to know where she had been. Jalila tried not to smile as she endured their familiar scolding. She longed to hug them. She longed to cry.

That evening, her last evening before she left Habara, Jalila walked the shore alone again. Somehow, it seemed the place to her where Pavo's ghost was closest. Jalila could see her mother there now, as darkness welled up from between the rocks; a small, lithe body, always stooping, turning, looking. She tried going toward her; but Pavo's shadow always flickered shyly away. Still, it seemed to Jalila as if she had been led toward something, for here was the quartz-striped rock from that long-ago Season of the Soft Rains. Of course, there was no breathmoss left, the storms had seen to that, but nevertheless, as she bent down to examine it, Jalila was sure that she could see something beside it, twinkling clear from a rockpool through the fading light. She plunged her hand in. It was a stone, almost as smooth and round as many millions of others on the beach, yet this one was worked and carved. And its color was greenish-grey.

The soapstone scarab, somehow thrust here to this beach by the storms of potentiality that the tariquas of the Church of the Gateway stirred up by their impossible journeyings, although Jalila was pleased to see that it looked considerably less damaged than the object she remembered Kalal turning over and over in his nervous hands as he spoke to her future self. Here at last was the link that would bind her through the pages of destiny, and, for a moment, she hitched her hand back and prepared to throw it so far out into the ocean that it would never be reclaimed. Then her arm relaxed. Out there, all the way across the darkness of the bay, the tideflowers of Habara were glowing.

She decided to keep it. ❍

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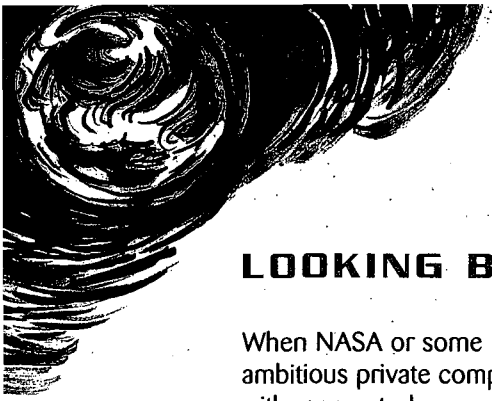

LOOKING BACK

When NASA or some
ambitious private company
with money to burn
finally gets its act together
and builds a colony on
the moon where people
will live for a long time,
the only natural color
they will see is the Earth.
It won't set or rise as
they bounce around
setting up experiments
and tending to their
lunar greenhouses and
feeling like pioneers.
Gaia will always
hang in the same spot
among the steady stars,
a slightly cloudy blue eye,
blinking once each month
in a slow closing and opening
of a dark eyelid. The Selenites
will look forward to that
awakening every month.
When their new home
is its most frigid and dark,
their old home will
look its best: full and alive.
How many of them
will regret their move,
however temporary,
to the desolate dusty rock
they once watched from
their own verdant backyards?

—Mario Milosevic

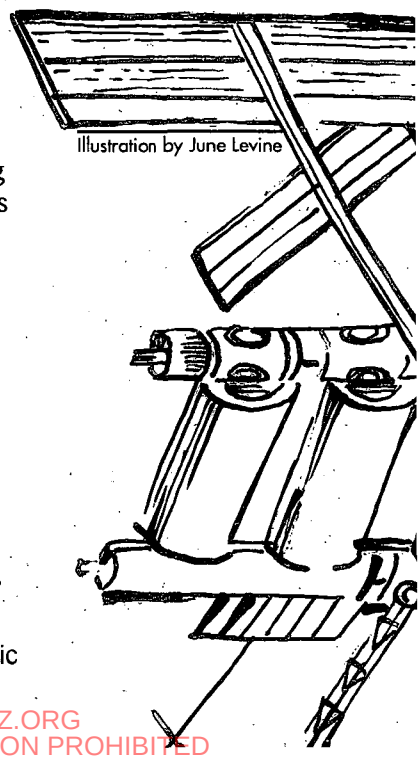

Illustration by June Levine

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

The Secret of Liveliness

Ever since Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), the type of novel that's come to be known as the "techno-thriller" has assumed the status of science fiction's sexier younger sister, stealing much of the public spotlight away from SF. Set in near-future venues often no further away than the day after tomorrow, these novels have appropriated all our trademark glitz of technology and hardware, added bracing doses of realpolitik and suspense, then arrayed themselves in streamlined, whiz-bang plots, however improbable. Casting off our genre's constraints of rigorous speculation, techno-thrillers can be outrageously seductive to the broad masses of readers in a way that hardcore SF, with its more "serious"—and, face it, sometimes stodgy—concerns cannot.

But any organism that survives must eventually adapt, and of late several writers from within our field seem to be embracing the best traits of the techno-thriller crowd while avoiding their illogical, anti-science excesses. We can cite Greg Bear and Nancy Kress as trailblazers. Even as determinedly hardcore an SF writer as Bruce Sterling utilizes the odd techno-thriller conceit in such works as *Distraction* (1998) and *Zeitgeist* (2000). Such hybridization, I think, is all to the good.

Now arrives Paul McAuley's *The Secret of Life* (Tor, hardcover, $25.95, 413 pages, ISBN 0-765-30080-X, and not to be confused with Rudy Rucker's transreal classic of the same title from 1985) to show us just how such a blending should be done. On the surface, this book is no different from any of McAuley's earlier accomplished novels. There's plenty of his patented speculative insights and sharp examination of culture and the way it changes under the impact of science. There's spaceflight to a hyper-real Mars, and an unconventional ET plague that threatens all humanity. We meet "ultrarad" ecology freaks resembling Edward Abbey's wetdreams, who have surgically modified their bodies for lesser environmental impact. And so on for a dozen other richly conceptualized tropes.

But the determinedly "practical" tone and affect of this book is deliberately inviting to the non-science-fiction-reader in a way that, say, McAuley's *Fairyland* (1995) or *Red Dust* (1993) were not.

Part of this is the non-eccentric characterization, part is the straightforward prose and clear-eyed explanatory style, part is his choice of what events and themes to focus on. But whatever the secret of his success, McAuley has done it: fashioned a techno-thriller that is simultaneously an example of respectable and admirable science fiction as well.

Dr. Mariella Anders, famous biologist, does not know it, but her quiet life in the year 2026 is about to be upended forever. Chinese astronauts have brought back living organisms from their base on Mars, a species of acquisitive life that shares earthly DNA and hence poses a threat to

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terrestrial existence. Loose and growing in the world's oceans, this Martian life has attracted governmental attention. A hasty mission to Mars is mounted, and Mariella shortly finds herself onboard with two other biologists: longtime rival Penn Brown and newcomer Anchee Ye.

Secret intrigues abound, and once on Mars Mariella finds her allegiances and goals shifting. Before her tale is over, she will become a hunted fugitive from all her old employers, battling both to save the globe and keep mankind free from its worst representatives.

McAuley gives all his personages rich backstories, distinctive personalities, and vivid emotional lives. He fashions a world identifiably and believably linked to our present. He propels his story forward smoothly and surprisingly, without longueurs or manic sections. (Although once in a while, the programmatic skeleton of his plot shows through, as when he bluntly reprises the action by telling us: "Now Mariella and Anchee Ye have to consider the immediate problem of survival in an area contaminated with a deadly microorganism, and the question of how they will be able to return to Lowell. . . .") He establishes a proper ratio of optimism to despair, pessimism to hope. In short, this is mature, suspenseful storytelling on every level.

During my reading of *Secret,* I found myself fondly recalling the work of John Brunner at his height. For a moment at that time, with such works as *Stand on Zanzibar* (1969) and *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), it seemed as if SF spoke to the everyday weirdnesses and challenging realities that many readers wanted to see authors handle. Now, with McAuley and others pointing the way, maybe this potential can finally be fulfilled.

Prodigy's Beginnings

The history of SF has seen a plethora of prodigal talents since its inception. Ray Bradbury, Michael Moorcock, Samuel Delany, Robert Bloch, Felicity Savage—all published significant work while either teens or very young adults. But lately whatever forces generate such upwellings of youthful creativity seem to have subsided. (Whether this is entirely attributable to the "graying" of the field remains to be proven.) So when we encounter a first novel initially conceived by a high-school senior and issued now while the author is still a college student, we take cheer. Especially since the quite moving performance would do credit to any first-novelist of whatever age.

Surprisingly for one so young, Stephen Chambers's *Hope's End* (Tor, hardcover, $23.95, 320 pages, ISBN 0-312-87349-2) is not some timely cyberpunk extravaganza or postmodern metafiction, but instead a rather old-fashioned, even archetypical SF tale, yet one reinvigorated by the author's obvious attachment to the mode he employs, which we might call the "captive universe" motif, after Harry Harrison's 1969 novel of the same title. In this mode, a cloistered community experiences some shock of intrusion from within or without that upsets old paradigms.

The city of Hope on the planet of Hera is a five-hundred-year-old settlement of modest size, some twenty thousand folks living a tightly circumscribed existence within walls that protect them from the sentient natives, the Frill—bogeymen who might possibly no longer even exist. Having retrogressed from any technological plateau enjoyed by their star-faring, colonizing ancestors, the citizens of Hope—ruled by a king, a council, and a religion based on an

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odd melange of the writings of William Blake and others—employ brute labor in the fields and swordplay in their streets.

Our hero—reluctant, unwitting, and dangerously naïve—is a street urchin named Vel. Unknowingly, he is heir to the throne and will soon become the center of all the contending forces: Justice Hillor, the power behind the King; Denon the head priest; and a group of rebels, among whom is a ninja-gal named Lydia. Forced to take on a role he abhors, Vel is chivvied from one end of the town to another, and even as far as the wilds outside, to the ruins of the Frill civilization. Eventually, he will end up insuring his society's precarious survival, but at tremendous cost.

The echoes and wisps of other SF classics are nigh-palpable here, without being oppressively cloying. Gene Wolfe, Mark Geston, Delany, Andre Norton, Jeffrey Ford: resonances of all these writers inform Chambers's vigorous storytelling. Sure, there are a few awkward spots—maybe too much info-dump up front; a Byronic, post-climactic monologue—but all is forgiven for such keen sentences as "On both sides, the houses rose two and three stories, the wood a grained version of the color his bandage had been." Consider the convincing realism of the staggering, awkward fight scene between Vel and Hillor, and you gain new respect for how deftly Chambers avoids many possible pitfalls that have snared apprentice writers since time immemorial.

Chambers's second novel will undoubtedly temper any of the ungainly exuberances of youth with the new silver-haired maturity of a college graduate!

Dance, Dance, Dance

Nowadays, few writers choose to employ—or are fitted to employ—the classic vehicle known as the "philosophical novel." This type of discursive, sometimes overly didactic book was once much more popular: our literary ancestor H. G. Wells turned out his share. In such a work, metaphysics becomes embodied in character and plot and setting, and arguments that would seem most at home in a Socratic agora achieve lively embodiment.

Maybe Brian Stableford and Greg Egan are the only folks that spring to your mind as accomplishing something along these lines. But if you omit the name of relative newcomer Howard Hendrix, then you're just not on the tip.

Hendrix's first two novels—*Lightpaths* (1997) and *Standing Wave* (1998), both reviewed by me in these pages—inhabited the strategy and form of the philosophical novel quite well on the whole, with minor wrinkles and baggy spots. Filled with existential conundrums about identity and human consciousness and the nature of reality, these books also sketched a very human tale about one strange day of transcendence and its aftermath. At times, they fell all over themselves in their eagerness to say everything Hendrix had to say. But how much more preferable this kind of overflowing bounty is to the ideational stinginess of so many lesser SF novels!

In his newest book, *Empty Cities of the Full Moon* (Ace, hardcover, $24.95, 441 pages, ISBN 0-441-00844-5), Hendrix takes a quantum leap forward in clarity, restraint and cleverness, without sacrificing any of the bravura elements of his earlier works.

A prion-based vaccine intended to cure many human ills, distributed globally in the 2030s, becomes a rogue infection that unleashes the "shamanic pandemic." Ancient wetware in the human brain is activated, bringing on a spirit-based danc-

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ing mania that shortly triggers the collapse of civilization. (This mental disturbance is also accompanied by inexplicable physiological changes verging on total somatic transformation.) Some thirty years later, the world looks like this: only eight million humans survive, divided into three camps. The Werfolk are the vast majority, those who have incorporated the shamanic experience into their existence. The Urfolk are a small baseline colony in the Bahamas, immune from the theological prions and possessed furthermore of longevity treatments. These Urfolk are aided by their genetically engineered maritime companions, the Merfolk.

But this stable balance of power is about to change, as several dissident Urfolk return to North America to seek to reconcile all the dichotomies among sundered humanity.

Hendrix accomplishes a lot in his novel. He affectionately and poetically portrays the post-apocalyptic landscape in the manner of George Stewart or Clifford Simak (or sometimes the more surreal Ballard). He makes his characters larger than mere mouthpieces of his contending ideas. He genuinely synthesizes out of many disparate religions and philosophies and sciences a new theory of consciousness and its place in the cosmos. And he embeds his novel firmly in a certain lineage, using chapter titles that hark back to classic science fiction novels ("Love Enough for Time" ring a bell?). His ecstatic shamanic culture stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Philip José Farmer's *Flesh* (1960) and his treatment of neural viruses calls to mind the recent work of John Barnes.

"Consciousness is a shortcut for getting from matter to spirit," thinks one of the characters. And Howard Hendrix's novel is a milestone on that very shortcut.

Alternative Nation

Anyone who wants to learn how native talent, love of a medium and genre, and tons of hard work and dedication can be channeled into a lifetime of superb artistic accomplishment need look no further than *The Amazing World of Carmine Infantino* (Vanguard Productions, trade, $19.95, 176 pages, ISBN 1-887591-12-5). This beautiful, inspirational book chronicles the career of the man responsible for such comic book masterpieces as the long run of Silver Age Flash, Adam Strange, and Batman, just to name a few vehicles of his imagination. Starting as a teen, Infantino (born 1925) has occupied just about every possible position in the comics industry with grace and intelligence. Innumerable colorful samples of his stunning artwork from every phase of his career vie with the anecdotal autobiography here for top honors. This is a book nobody with an interest in visual SF can forego.

A more recent comic to praise is *Fanboy* (DC Comics, trade, $12.95, 143 pages, ISBN 1-56389-724-5), by Mark Evanier and Sergio Aragones. This chucklesome, mild-spirited satire examines the life of one Finster, a teenage comics fan prone to wild daydreams in which his life is enchanted by imaginary (?) visits from his favorite heroes (all DC properties, natch). More than a score of famous artists jam with Aragones (of *Mad* magazine fame), producing glorious collages where, say, Gil Kane's Green Lantern helps declaw Finster's least-favorite teacher. Are "all comic book readers dweebs who couldn't get a date in a women's prison with a fistful of pardons"? Not if they have Evanier and Aragones on their side.

DC also offers the latest volume tracking the savage exploits of journalist Spider Jerusalem, offended

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and offensive inhabitant of a cybernoir-gonzo future: *Transmetropolitan: Lonely City* (trade, $14.95, unpaginated, ISBN 1-56389-722-9). Having been enveloped in a duplicitous, evil US presidential campaign in the prior volume, Spider now must come to terms with the new, harsher America that follows. This aftermath volume consequently lacks some of the high drama of the earlier book, but the smaller stories herein are still captivating. Warren Ellis's writing and characterization finally transcend the Hunter Thompson influences the first books labored under, and the art by penciler Darick Robertson and inker Rodney Ramos continues to be candy-bright and acid-tart.

Subtle and complex, alluring and admonitory, the latest graphic novel from NBM is fourth in a series—"Cities of the Fantastic"—I have not heretofore seen. But no prior familiarity is necessary to enjoy Belgian co-creators Schuiten and Peeters' latest entry, *Brüsel* (hardcover, $19.95, 120 pages, ISBN 1-56163-291-0). This book follows the ironic and blackly humorous misfortunes of Constant Abeels, an average citizen of the imaginary metropolis of Brüsel, a Borgesian, Kafkaesque city remotely cognate with our own Brussels. Abeels is a simple florist who merely wants to introduce plastic plants to his customers. But he has the bad luck to be swept up in a mad urban renewal project, and finds himself battling obstinate bureaucrats, careless construction workers, quack doctors, and loony professors. Only the love of Tina, a rebel agitator, serves to help him stay afloat through the chaos of a city improving itself to destruction. Meticulous and exotic architectural vistas frame a gallery of indelible faces, and both story and artwork are masterpieces of speculative maturity. This book has much to say—entertainingly—regarding our blind dash for progress.

Mostly, as readers, we focus rightfully on the contents of books, not the medium itself or the packaging thereof. But from time to time it behooves us to consider with pleasure and awe the book as artifact, its commercial history and design. The latest such survey to both delight and inform is Richard Lupoff's *The Great American Paperback* (Collector's Press, hardcover, $60.00, 320 pages, ISBN 1-888054-50-6). This is the most recent full-color treasure trove from Collector's Press, following on the success of their Weinberg, Robinson, and Goulart pop-culture histories, and it fully lives up to the high standards established by its cousins. Lupoff's text is breezy but knowledgeable, full of key facts and intriguing sidelights on the invention, spread and Golden Age of the humble mass-market paperback. He has selected over six hundred vivid images, ranging from high art to kitsch, carefully documenting the artists wherever possible, and cementing the writers and titles firmly in the evolutionary chain of publishing. A rich resource for collector and fan alike, this book is a must-have.

Another splendid pop-culture history is to be found in Van Burnham's *Supercade: A Visual History of the Videogame Age: 1971-1984* (MIT Press, hardcover, $49.95, 488 pages, ISBN 0-262-02492-6). It's impossible to praise this book too highly. Burnham collates all the scattered data relating to the genesis of videogaming—both home and arcade—into a fascinating story, then assembles a bounty of enticing images—the people, the screenshots, the packaging, the arcade machines themselves—to accompany her lively text. Looking like a hypertrophied version of *Wired* magazine, this oversized book is both a visual as-

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sault and a lulling bath, providing a Bible for the sometimes nebulous videogame esthetic. Along with over a dozen other writers, Burnham uncovers the roots of an industry and recreational pursuit that today sometimes seems poised to incorporate all other media within itself. And to think that the whole juggernaut began with some Doc Smith fanatics given access to a hulking MIT computer in 1961!

Henry Wessells and his Nutmeg Point District Mail offer us another treasure from the cache of misplaced or forgotten Avram Davidson stories with *The Beasts of the Elysian Fields* (chapbook, price unavailable, 12 pages, ISBN unavailable). Originally published in an unidentified men's magazine under the pen name of "Conrad Amber," this tale is notable for the introduction of Davidson's well-remembered protagonist Jack Limekiller. But as Wessells explains in an afterword, although Davidson nailed the Caribbean setting on first go-round, the nature of his protagonist changed radically in the quintessential series later on. Still, this rousing manhunt adventure bears all the hallmarks of Davidson's wit and erudition.

Treading lightly yet significantly into Richard Calder territory, Bruce Boston delights, frightens and illuminates with the adventures of a hyperfeminine construct in his *Pavane for a Cyber-Princess* (Miniature Sun Press, chapbook, $5.00, 15 pages, ISBN 0-9676666-5-1). Boston's usual meticulous poetry has here been refined to new sharpnesses. I particularly enjoyed his revisionary definitions of words he's used, a motif that caps each section. The Princess is at one point described as having "cultured three beautiful screams," and I think we can say Boston has done the same.

Darrell Schweitzer, on the other hand, proves that when he wants to, he can be the Ogden Nash of horror poetry. His *They Never Found the Head* (Zadok Allen: Publisher, chapbook, $4.00, 26 pages, ISBN unavailable) contains a dozen goofy poems on macabre themes, illustrated perfectly by Allen Koszowski. Just for tacking a suffix on the word "eldritch" and turning it into an adverb, Schweitzer takes the laurels in this competition. (When ordering, please make checks payable to the author, not his publisher, who is rather too fictional to cash them, being a borrowed persona from the HPL canon.)

Jeff Noon's wonderful novels—*Vurt* (1993), *Pollen* (1995), *et al.*—exhibit intense wordplay and a propensity for neologisms and strange syntaxes and jargons. This playfulness dominates utterly in *Cobralingus* (Codex, trade, $14.95, 120 pages, ISBN 1-899598-16-2), a *jeu d'esprit* that's cousin to the famous "cut-ups" of William Burroughs. Devising a set of clever algorithms for transforming any input text, Noon takes such samples as, for instance, a mimetic description of a British street scene and morphs it into an SF vignette that begins thus: "At dusk, on the lakes of aroma, the people of Saturn gather relic songs from the mist." As a mind-bending exercise in the plasticity of language, this book harks to the dice-and-splice techniques of modern music almost more than any literary model.

In *Sextopia* (Circlet Press, trade, $14.95, 181 pages, ISBN 1-885865-31-7) editor Cecilia Tan has produced her best anthology to date. Asking her writers to examine "the intersections of desire with society, where erotic needs and a society's rules conflict or interact," she has staked out fertile sexual-speculative territory indeed. The quality of these eleven stories is uniformly high, but I'll pick a few standouts.

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Eric Del Carlo's "To Love and Riot" postulates orgies as a crowd control tactic, and then boldly employs first-person immersion in the narrative. "The Delectation Debates" by Renée Charles is political satire worthy of Paul Krassner, wherein candidates for high office are quizzed on their libidos. Suzy McKee Charnas limns a sour yet all too believable future in which a woman artist finds ultimate refuge only in her own Pygmalion-ish creation. And Catherine Asaro provides a homoerotic pendant to her Skolian Empire series in "Soul of Light." This collection boldly goes where few stories venture.

As a novelist, Tan proves herself just as inventive and fecund as those she publishes, with *The Velderet* (Circlet Press, trade, $14.95, 183 pages, ISBN 1-885865-27-9), a blend of Le Guin and Delany. On a nameless twin-mooned world, the land of Bellonia exists now in "the Age of Equality," a time of engineered harmony where any coercion of others is forbidden. But the Bellonians were once slaveowners (till they exterminated their chattel in an act of genocide), and the impulse to master and be mastered still runs illicitly deep in some citizens. Our focus: two roommates, a man named Kobi and a woman named Merin. Confessing their desires leads to a maze of S&M (or as Tan ingeniously recasts the practice, "R&V" for Rough and Vigorous). With the arrival of some would-be conquerors from outside Bellonia, the Gerrish, Kobi and Merin finds themselves in the unlikely role of unwilling ambassadors, simply because they can understand the forceful newcomers. Tan crafts lots of hot and heavy action quite well, including schematics for cybersex, right down to the kind of online menus one might consult. Never didactic, she truly shows without telling, and the result is engagingly erotic.

Jennifer Barlow, debut novelist of *Hamlet Dreams* (Aardwolf Press, trade, $13.95, 209 pages, ISBN 0-9706225-1-1), brings us a dark fantasy where sexual naïveté lures lovers into psychic and mortal dangers. Diametrically opposed to the horror film trope of "sluts attract the serial killer first," it's a refreshing twist, and more in line with older notions of evil finding innocence too infuriating to survive. Zac Martins is an unassuming chap—a dog-groomer, in fact—with a secret. Since youth, he's been able to visit the Other Place, a psychic venue fully as tangible as reality. But with the entrance into his life of his first real love—Cecile Graham, a schoolteacher—he's begun to abandon his childhood refuge. This does not sit well with the spider at the heart of the Other Place, an entity named Carcajou, who needs Zac's visits for his own purposes. Carcajou's scheming in two worlds leads both Zac and Cecile into depths of betrayal and anguished self-knowledge: necessary steps toward a maturity they lack. Barlow's prose here is well-honed and her story moves along at a good clip, with action shuttling between Earth and the Other Place. The Hamlet motif is employed tellingly. Supporting characters do their job efficiently, and her climax is both sobering and reaffirming. All in all, a fine opening turn on upon the stage.

Aardwolf's other offering comes from an even more accomplished writer: Daniel Pearlman's *The Best-Known Man in the World* (trade, $14.95, 256 pages, ISBN 0-9706225-0-3). Pearlman's satirical, surreal stories hark both backward to the heyday of *Galaxy* magazine (in "Over the H.I.L.L.", society has predetermined death days for all its citizens—except one who chooses not to follow the rules) and aslant to such European masters as Italo

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Calvino (the title story addresses metaphysical issues regarding the documentation of existence). With a talent for crafting opening lines worthy of Kuttner ("Charles was rather short for a midget." "It always surprised Emma that whenever she actually *saw* Toni she lost her intense urge to kill her."), Pearlman lobs hand grenades of laughter at pretension, egomania and indifference.

Curious about the state of science fiction Down Under? Than you could not better repay yourself than by grabbing a copy of *Nor of Human* . . . (CSFG Publishing, trade, AUS$16.95, 190 pages, ISBN 0-646-41393-7). Editor Geoffrey Maloney, along with fourteen other fine writers (all unjustly unknown to us sheltered North Americans), delve with wit and vigor into the lives of strange beings, both stefnal and fantastical, from wyverns to alien "possums." I enjoyed every entry here, and it's hard to pick favorites, but I was impressed by Allan Price's "Quacaha," which addresses an alien invasion of Earth's biosphere in ingenious ways.

PS Publishing continues to pour forth a flood of outstanding novellas, in their enticing format of limited edition signed hardcover ($40.00) and cheaper trade paperback ($14.00). The latest is Conrad Williams's *Nearly People* (hardcover, 78 pages, ISBN 1-902880-19-6; trade, ISBN 1-902880-18-8), the chronicle of a Coventry of sorts, the quarantined urban neighborhood known as Howling Mile. Here life is cheap, disease rampant, cruelty the S.O.P. But nonetheless love and honor endure, mainly in the actions of the female protagonist Carrier, whose hidden identity proves to be instrumental in setting the people of this wasteland free. Like John Shirley, Williams employs an in-your-face, gritty approach and language, but the thrust and vitality of his story makes the outrageous all too plausible. In an age that has seen such assaults as the destruction of Sarajevo, this tale rings all too true.

Name an Argentinian fantasist of the twentieth century. Chances are you immediately nominated the world-renowned J.L. Borges. But before Borges came the forgotten but talented Leopoldo Lugones (1874-1938), once a globally famous figure notable for his life and politics as well as his fiction. Now you can taste the archaic yet utterly postmodern flavor of his prose by picking up Lugones's 1906 masterpiece, the story collection titled *Strange Forces* (Latin American Literary Review Press, trade, $13.95, 126 pages, ISBN 1-891270-05-2). Editor and translator Gilbert Alter-Gilbert provides a concise introduction that sets Lugones and his work in context. Then follow a dozen knockout stories ranging across the landscape of the fantastic, from the Poe-like "The Bloat Toad" to the Gernsbackian "Metamusic." "The Firestorm," which calls up the shade of M.P. Shiel, would be enough reason by itself to purchase this volume. Sam Moskowitz, who delighted in finding overlooked proto-SF writers, must be applauding from his seat in SF heaven at the appearance of this book.

I have long wondered about the first novel written by one of my favorite authors, Brian Aldiss, and published 'way back in 1955. The original edition of the book was generally unavailable in the pre-Internet age, and only recently has it been reissued, allowing me to satisfy my curiosity at a reasonable price. *The Brightfount Diaries* (House of Stratus, trade, $11.50, 171 pages, ISBN 0-7551-0054) proves to be well worth the wait, a veritable youthful gem. An amiable, Pickwickian comedy starring a twenty-

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five-year-old named Peter who works in Brightfount's bookshop, this chatty, droll novel in diary form covers a year of Peter's life. We meet his eccentric aunt and uncle, his coworkers and girlfriends, and the various goofball customers who throng Brightfount's. Based on Aldiss's own experiences as an Oxford bookstore clerk, this novel rings with verisimilitude and closely observed life, rich with worldly yet uncynical humor. Like some kind of literary version of the popular PBS sitcom import *Are You Being Served?*, Aldiss's book celebrates the quotidian commerce that intersects all our lives. And by the way: House of Stratus has brought back into print practically everything Aldiss has written, so now there's no reason you have to wait as I did to enjoy any particular book by this Grandmaster.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch brings us a humbly powerful collection with her *Stories for an Enchanted Afternoon* (Golden Gryphon, hardcover, $24.95, 284 pages, ISBN 1-930846-00-92). The beautiful but wistful Thomas Canty cover belies to a degree the hard-edged fiction within. Never one for melodrama or overwrought prose, Rusch concentrates instead on the slow and deliberate amassing of insightful, low-keyed incidents and details to serve as the foundation for some neat stefnal conceits. With underlying themes of filial and parental duties, many of these stories address the complex demands of familial roles under odd circumstances (on, say, a colonized planet inhabited by humanoid aliens, as in "Skin Deep"). Additionally, in such tales as "Strange Creatures" and "Spirit Guides" Rusch exhibits her flair for the combined mystery/SF mode. And when the protagonist of "Coolhunting" is typified as "someone willing to take that extra step that might be a success or a mistake," we know we are getting a subliminal self-portrait of the author herself.

Kevin Anderson shows us a wide range of styles, topics, and subgenres in his assemblage of eighteen stories titled *Dogged Persistence* (Golden Gryphon, hardcover, $25.95, 303 pages, ISBN 1-930846-03-7). Many of these fine pieces occupy historical landscapes (Victorian or Elizabethan England, Shogunate Japan, Tsarist Russia) with tactile solidity, while others inhabit future venues just as tangible. (The title story, my favorite here, has to be one of the best nanotech tales around.) Several collaborations show Anderson adapting his fluid talents to other voices (his story set in Frank Herbert's *Dune* universe; one that sequelizes Harlan Ellison's famous *Outer Limits* teleplay "Soldier"; and one with rock'n'roll musician Neil Peart). But whether a solo outing or one with his peers, an Anderson story always features his trademarks of cool rationalism, cogent ideas, and suspenseful pacing.

It seems no accident that the protagonist of Kelly Link's hilariously melancholy story "Water off a Black Dog's Back" is named "Carroll," a tribute no doubt to one of her influences. For her writing belongs in the same camp as Jonathan Carroll's: spooky, indeterminate, a kind of exemplar of literary Heisenbergism. The more you push on any one dimension of her eerie, funny tales, seeking to know the unknowables she deftly sketches, the less you know about other slippery aspects of the text. Link is a fantasist in the grand tradition of Carol Emshwiller, John Crowley, and Robert Coover, blurring the lines between dreams, myths, and reality in exciting new ways. All this talent is on display in *Stranger Things Happen* (Small Beer Press, trade, $16.00, 266 pages, ISBN 1-931520-

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00-3), an astonishingly good collection—which gathers her World Fantasy Award winner "The Specialist's Hat," plus two stories new to the world, as well as eight others—into an assemblage of awesome proportions. From its campy retro Nancy Drew-style cover to its closing credits, this is a postmodern fairy-tale landmark.

Norman Partridge evokes such rough 'n' tumble mentors as Jim Thompson, James Cain, and Joe Lansdale in his concussive, blunt-edged stories, two dozen of which are collected in *The Man with the Barbed Wire Fists* (Night Shade Books, hardcover, $27.00, 429 pages, ISBN 1-892389-11-8). Always fiercely mimetic even when dealing with the supernatural, Partridge's tales are not for the faint of heart. The opening salvo, "Red Right Hand," detailing the gruesome demise of a quartet of serial killers, is the best example of his philosophy: grand guignol with a rueful wish that life might be nicer, but what the hell, we must go on. From time to time, Partridge indulges in some deliberate pulp-era tropes—such as the Chinatown/Fu Manchu imagery found in "Return of the Shroud"—but generally he anchors his bloody fables in the here and now. That puts him squarely in the same camp as Dennis Etchison, and that's a fine place to stand.

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Aardwolf Press, POB 14792, Durham, NC 27709. CGSF Publishing, PO Box 98, Latham ACT 2615, Australia. Circlet Press, 1770 Mass. Avenue, #278, Cambridge, MA 02140. Codex, PO Box 148, Hove BN3 3DQ, United Kingdom. Collector's Press, PO Box 230986, Portland, OR 97281. DC Comics, 1700 Broadway, NY, NY 10019. Golden Gryphon Press, 3002 Perkins Road, Urbana, IL 61802. House of Stratus, <*www.houseofstratus.com*>. LALRP, 121 Edgewood Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15218. Miniature Sun Press, PO Box 11002, Napa Valley, CA 94581. NBM, 555 8th Avenue, Suite 1202, NY, NY 10018. Night Shade Books, 560 Scott, #304, SF, CA 94117. Nutmeg Point District Mail, PO Box 43072, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043. PS Publishing, 98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE, United Kingdom. Small Beer Press, 360 Atlantic Avenue, PMB 132, Brooklyn, NY 11217. Vanguard Productions, 59-A Philhower Road, Lebanon, NJ 08833. Zadok Allen: Publisher, 6644 Rutland Street, Philadelphia, PA 19149. ○

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SF Conventional Calendar

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APRIL 2002

5–7—**JerseyDevilCon,** For info, write: **Box 403, Metuchen NJ 08840.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(E-mail) jerseydevilcon@aol.com. (Web) www.jerseydevilcon.com.** Con will be held in: Edison NJ (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton. Guests will include: Pournelle, Pratchett, Grant.

5–7—**WillyCon, (402) 375-7321.** Wayne State College, Wayne NE. Hogan, T. Nielsen, Clites. "Science in SF."

5–7—**OmniCon, (615) 459-6019. www.omnicononline.org.** Roaden Univ. Center, Tenn. Tech. U., Cookeville TN.

5–7—**FILKONtario, hayman@bserv.com.** Sheraton Airport, Toronto ON. Shoji, Huff. SF/fantasy folksinging.

5–7—**FrightVision, (330) 297-5930.** Airport Sheraton, Cleveland OH. Savini. Commercial horror media event.

12–14—**OdysseyCon, (608) 260-9924.** Concourse Hotel, Madison WI. T. Zahn, D. B. Coe, G. Gygax, J. Vinge.

12–14—**World Horror Con, www.whc2002.org.** Radisson O'Hare, Rosemont IL. Wolfe, Gaiman, Wilson, Singer.

13–14—**Dort.Con, (0049 02351) 95 24 22. dort.con@erco.com.** Dortmund Germany. Norman Spinrad.

19–21—**ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. (631) 632-6045.** State Univ., Stony Brook NY. F. Paul Wilson.

19–21—**Kubla Khan, 647 Devon Dr., Nashville TN 37220. (615) 832-8402.** Days Inn Airport. Pohl, Ron Miller.

19–21—**EerieCon, Box 412, Buffalo NY 14226. www.eeriecon.org.** Days Inn, Niagara Falls NY. Butler, Bruton.

19–21—**StarFest, Box 24955, Denver CO 80224. (303) 757-5850.** Holiday Inn Airport. Commercial Trek show.

19–21—**Anime Central, 1400 W. Devon Ave. #410, Chicago IL 60660.** www.acen.org. O'Hare Hyatt, Rosemont IL.

26–28—**ConFurence, Box 84721, San Diego CA 92138. (619) 523-9814.** Hilton, Burbank CA. Anthropomorphics.

26–28—**Fanime, Box 8068, San Jose CA 92138. www.fanime.com.** Westin, Santa Clara CA. Anime.

26–28—**SakuraCon, 900 Meridian Location E. #19-407, Milton WA 98354. (253) 503-2233.** SeaTac Hilton. Anime.

27–28—**VulKon, Box 297122, Pembroke Pines FL 33029. (954) 441-8735.** Cleveland OH. Commercial Trek show.

MAY 2002

3–5—**DemiCon, Box 7572, Des Moines IA 50322. (515) 224-7654.** Univ. Pk. Holiday Inn. F. P. Wilson, A. Clark.

3–5—**Book Expo, 383 Main Av., Norwalk CT 06851. (203) 840-5614.** Javits, New York NY. Book trade show.

3–5—**Star Wars Celebration, Box 707, Renton WA 98057. (866) 334-4334.** Conv. Ctr., Indianapolis IN.

3–5—**Malice Domestic, 703 Kenbrook Dr., Silver Spring MD 20902.** Crystal Marriott, Arlington VA. Mysteries.

10–12—**FedCon, Schisslerstr. 4, Augsburg 86154, Germany. (+0821) 219-0932.** Maritim Hotel, Bonn. Star Trek.

17–19—**LepreCon, Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85285. (480) 945-6890.** Embassy Suites N., Phoenix AZ. Peter David.

AUGUST 2002

29–Sep. 2—**ConJose, Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088. www.conjose.org.** San Jose CA. The WorldCon. $180.

AUGUST 2003

28–Sep. 1—**TorCon 3, Box 3, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1A2. www.torcon3.on.ca.** The WorldCon. C$200/US$135.

SEPTEMBER 2004

2–6—**Noreascon 4, Box 1010, Framingham MA 01701. www.noreascon.org.** Boston MA. Tenn. WorldCon. $100+.

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NEXT ISSUE

JUNE COVER STORY

Hot new writer **Charles Stross** takes us back to the wired-up, dazzlingly fast-paced Information Age future of his acclaimed and popular "Manfred Macx" stories with our lead story for June, the pyrotechnic and wildly inventive "Halo." In this one, Stross cranks things *up* a notch even from his former frenetic concept-dense pace, introducing us to what might be called "Manfred Macx: The Next Generation," as the *daughter* of Manfred Macx leaves a frazzled Earth tottering on the edge of a Vingian Singularity to travel to Jupiter space, and there confront an even weirder destiny than anything that could have awaited her back home, in company with a cast of characters, both real and unreal, that even Manfred Macx himself might have found a bit peculiar. . . . This one is sure to be talked about next year at awards time, so don't miss it!

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Hugo-winner **James Patrick Kelly** returns in June, as he has every June issue for nineteen years now, this time taking us back to Prehistoric Days for the saga of a hunter who drastically changes his "Luck" when he encounters some scary dwellers in the Spirit World, and the Last of the Mammoths to boot; Hugo-winner **Allen M. Steele** returns us to the newly settled alien planet Coyote for a look at a solitary adventurer who finds himself in deadly danger as well as "Lonesome and a Long Way from Home"; **Howard V. Hendrix** makes a dazzling *Asimov's* debut with an investigation into the mystic origins of "Incandescent Bliss"; new writer **Liz Williams** invites us to the table for "The Banquet of the Lords of Night"—although you may be too terrified to stay in your seats!; critically acclaimed British "Hard Science" writer **Brian Stableford** wryly demonstrates that even in a high-tech future a Man's Got To Do What A Man's Got To Do, even if it involves "Taking the Piss"; and **Robert Reed**, one of our most popular and prolific authors, provides us with an unsettling examination of sin and redemption in a near-future information age, in the chilling "She Sees My Monsters Now."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column investigates some peculiar "Problems of Time Travel"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On The Net" column checks out some "Cons" you might find of interest; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our June issue on sale at your newsstand on April 30, 2002, or subscribe today (you can also subscribe electronically, or order *Asimov's* in downloadable electronic formats, at our *Asimov's* website, *www.asimovs.com*) and be sure to miss none of the great stuff we've got coming up for you this year! And don't forget that a gift subscription to *Asimov's* makes a **great** present at **any** time of the year, not just Christmas time!

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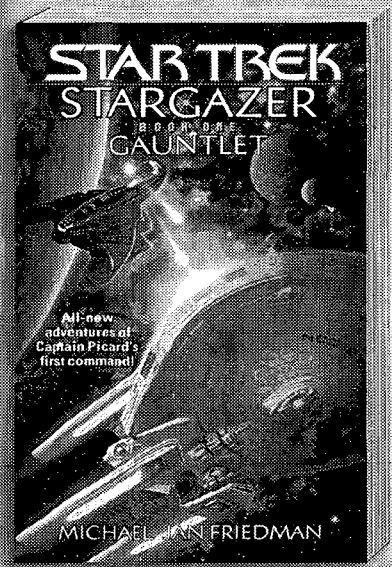

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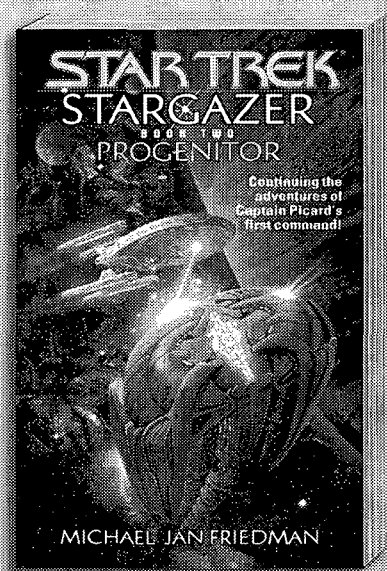

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